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Saddle Fit And Understanding The Importance Of Full Panel Contact.

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There are still a lot of 'opinions' on what constitutes a properly fitting saddle, but essentially a large part of proper saddle fit is simple common sense! On the other hand, if it were truly such 'common sense' you would think many more people would understand and buy into the facts.

Full Panel Contact

Once you've established that your saddle's gullet/channel is the correct width for your horse, with the panels resting on your horse's longissimus dorsi muscles, and not on his spine or ligaments, you need to ensure that your saddle's panels make even contact with your horse's back. We want the saddle to sit on the optimal weight-bearing surface of the horse's back, and to distribute the rider's weight over an area that equals approximately 220 square inches and ends at the last rib.

How to Check for Full Panel Contact

Put your saddle on the horse, put your right hand under the stirrup bar area, gently hold the saddle in position with your left hand, and with your right hand palm facing up slowly move your hand from front to back – you will feel a lot of contact on top of your hand. Put your hand flat on the horse's back (you have greater sensitivity on the top of your hand, and feel if there is nice even panel contact from front to back. Check this on both sides. If the saddle sits flush at the front and back and loosely or no contact in the middle, this results in excess pressure at the front and back (bridging). If the saddle is tight in the middle and loose in the front and back (rocking) there is excess pressure in the middle of the saddle.



Saddle fits well- full panel contact.

Some people find it easier to test for even contact by sliding a pen or pencil in between the panel and their horse's back. Use whichever method (pen or hand) works best for you.

When a saddle rocks, the panels at the front and/or back of the saddle do not make even contact with the horse's back. Think of the motion of a rocking horse. In this case, there is excessive pressure in the middle of the saddle, and the rider's entire weight is concentrated in this one area. To determine if your saddle rocks, place the saddle on your horse's back without a saddle pad. Push down on the pommel. If the cantle lifts up off the horse's back, your saddle rocks.

Note that sometimes your saddle may be made with panels that deliberately flare up at the very back, so the last inch or so of the panels don't make contact with your horse's back. This is done in



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specialized cases: for instance, when there is a need to accommodate a tall or large rider on a horse with a short saddle-support area. If fitted correctly, this saddle will not rock. This extra room is also important for the back to come up when the horse engages during movement.

Sometimes we hear that a saddle that bridges slightly is actually a good thing, because when the horse lifts his back as he is being ridden, his back will come up into and fill in the space left by the bridge. While this may seem logical at first, in reality, it doesn't work. The reasoning here is faulty. To demonstrate this, the next time your saddlefitter fits your saddle, ask her/him to put the Arc device or Saddletech (a metal tool used to measure the curvature and width of your horse's back) on your horse with the middle two wings lifted so that they do not make contact with your horse's back. This will simulate a saddle that bridges. Then scratch your horse's stomach along his midline, so that he raises his back. You will see that the middle 2 wings of the Arc device still do not make contact with your horse's back. This shows that even when your horse lifts his back while being ridden, his saddle will still bridge. The goal of saddle fitting is to have the saddle distribute the riders' weight evenly over the saddle support area, and it is important that the saddle neither bridge nor rock (excessively). Most riders would prefer a saddle that doesn't move at all, however, to maintain the ability for loose, harmonious, and supple movement of the horse's back and to ensure the rider's body is in positive tension, the saddle should actually be able to 'rock' (very slightly) front to back. Saddles that don't move at all on the back may actually put too much pressure on the floating ribs and on the sensitive part of the horse's back outside of the saddle support area behind the 18th lumbar vertebrae. In a future article I will discuss exactly how to determine your horse's saddle support area.

Above left, Mr. Schleese uses the Arc Device. Above right, photo courtesy of Dr. Joanna Robson