



This rider is sitting on a well-balanced, properly fitting saddle and the horse is moving in complete harmony with her.



Signs of POOR SADDLE FIT

If you notice physical or behavioral changes in your horse, it may have more to do with the fit of your saddle than anything else. Here's what to watch for.

Over the past few years, there's been a proliferation of articles in all sorts of publications on topics like "How to slow down the rushing horse", "How to ride the stumble out of your horse", "How to make your horse go forward", and on and on. All these negative and unwanted "behaviors" from horses may actually be due to something as simple as a poorly-fitting saddle.

Poor saddle fit impacts your horse's reflex points and causes simple instinctive reactions rather than conscious behaviors. But many articles seem to indicate that these reactions are a result of rider error, and attempt to address corrections by either offering solutions to change rider behavior (or fitness levels), or more drastically, calling in a vet to administer pharmaceuticals to address the issues. So what are some of the signs that your problems could be due to poor saddle fit?

WARNING SIGNS

These are just some of the indications that your saddle could be bothering your horse:

- A dip in the muscle just behind the wither
- Incorrect development of the neck ("ewe" neck)
- Tail hanging crooked, "pinched in" or swishing
- Hollow, unengaged back
- Whites of eyes showing
- Excessive chomping of bit when ridden
- Ears laid back
- "Girthiness" (bloating when the girth is being done up)
- Stumbling or tripping
- Four-beat canter/pace
- Bucking or rearing
- Resistance to going forward
- Refusals at jumps
- White hairs or blisters at wither area
- Poor work attitude, general "bad behavior"

The list is overwhelming. Obviously, there are sometimes absolutely valid psychosomatic reasons behind some of these things, or actual illnesses causing these behaviors (or lamenesses), but I would like to suggest that before you resort to


expensive veterinary or “neuroscientific” treatments, you invest in a simple diagnostic evaluation of your saddle fit using a qualified saddle fitter who understands equine biomechanics and anatomy and the ramifications for your horse if the saddle doesn’t fit properly.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

If the saddle puts pressure on the reflex points along your horse’s spine because of a gullet channel that is too narrow, or because it twists during movement due to natural asymmetry, the horse will reflexively lower his back to escape the pressure/pain. The goal of having the horse engage his back or bring it up during riding is unachievable. Forward impulse and momentum are lost. Defensive behavior from the horse and a rider out of balance are just some of the other ramifications. This results in a frustrating experience for both horse and rider. The horse would like to respond to the aids the rider gives him, but the pressure on his reflex points inhibits his ability to do so. Think about your knee reflex – even if the doctor told you to refrain from kicking him when he taps your patella, you would anyway, and there would be nothing you could consciously do about it.

So it makes sense that a saddle that consistently puts pressure on the horse’s reflex points would be frustrating and eventually even damaging to the horse. Let’s say you give your horse the signal to move forward. However, if the tree angle is too wide, or the tree width too narrow, and the saddle tree is putting too much pressure on Cranial Nerve 11 (more on this next time), then the horse cannot really comply. The reason for this is that the saddle hits the reflex point, which hinders the horse’s ability to move. The actual reflexive reaction at this point is to drop the back, lock the shoulder, and rotate the pelvis.

Despite his best intentions, the horse instinctively will not – and more importantly, cannot – move forward. He experiences the inner battle of wanting to obey his rider (“Let’s go forward”) and his instincts (“Stay still”). A losing proposition for the horse – and possibly physically and psychologically painful for him, as the rider thinks his immobility is simply stubbornness and starts using spurs and whip aids. Consider trying to briskly drive your car away while the handbrake is still on. Tires will squeal, you can move only haltingly, and smoke is generated from the burning of the brake pads. That’s what your horse goes through, and what it feels like.

So let’s listen a little more to what our horses are trying to tell us – they can’t speak, but their behavior speaks volumes! And if it can be fixed by something as easy as adjusting the saddle – isn’t that a win/win for all concerned? Ensure a certified saddle fitter/saddle ergonomist analyzes your fit – someone who at least has a basic knowledge of equine anatomy and biomechanics, and knows the causative issues behind some of the problems you’re experiencing, so he/she can help you figure out a solution for you and your horse. 

Jochen Schlee came to Canada in 1986 to establish and register the trade of saddlery in North America, operating the only authorized saddlery training facility in Ontario. Schlee is the world-leading manufacturer of saddles designed for women, specializing in the unique anatomical requirements of female riders. Schlee provides diagnostic saddle fit analysis and saddle fitting services across North America to maintain optimal saddle fit to horse and rider. Saddleft 4 Life educational programs and certification courses are held throughout the world. His first book *Suffering in Silence: The Saddle Fit Link to Physical and Psychological Trauma in Horses*, is available from HorseBooksetc. and through Amazon.com in hard cover or e-format. Saddlesforwomen.com; Saddleft4life.com; Schlee.com; 800-225-2242.
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