

The Circle of Influence and Saddle Balance

(aka "Saddle Fitness and the Balancing Act!")

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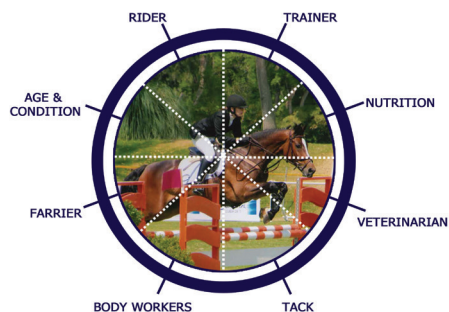
Saddle fitting is nothing new; saddles have been around for many centuries, albeit the use has changed from military necessity in which the cavalry officer taught his soldiers how to make the necessary changes to re-balance the saddle every time the horse's conformation changed. This constant 'balancing act' was important for each rider as the horse was used for his livelihood. Today the use of horses has changed to the point that they are mainly used in sport and recreation, and much of this critical knowledge for the working horse has been lost, forgotten or is being ignored. In addition, while for many centuries men made saddle for men, in the last 50 years the demographics have changed to the point where the majority of riders are women. The question is why we have neglected this aspect of horse care when we spend so much time, effort, and money for the other parts of the circle of influence – when the solution is sometimes nothing more than rebalancing the saddle – as it has been done hundreds of years before. This negligence could be attributed to simply not knowing – but through modern science and the use of fiber optic cameras, thermography, MRIs etc., we are recognizing the damage that comes from this one critical piece.

As mentioned many times before, one of the most common injuries to the horse is to the suspensory ligament – caused by poor (wrong, incorrect – however you want to say it) riding. The horse's general anatomy and means of locomotion has not changed in thousands of years but the lack of knowledge and uncaring as to what actually improves and protects a horse is seemingly on the rise. What we are seeing being rewarded at the dressage shows is one of the main reasons for this descent into harming instead of helping our horses. The rules written by various Dressage Federations (up to and including the FEI) which follow the classical principles of dressage training and movement are being ignored and replaced by flashiness/hyperflexion, particularly the "show trot" that thrills the uneducated audience who is unaware of the harm being inflicted upon the horses they love so much. The controversy ensues because top riders are being rewarded with top marks and applause by an unknowing public and judges who should know better – resulting in damage to the horse which is sometimes irreversible. What happens when the horse is ridden in this flashy trot?



The back is pushed down, the balance of the saddle falls too far back, and the rider sits behind the centre of gravity – causing too much pressure over the last floating ribs. This causes a chain reaction – the saddle stuffing compresses in the rear, rider goes into chair seat, and the excess pressure on the sacro-iliac joint of the horse makes it nearly impossible for him to engage from behind and step under. The horse becomes what is called a 'leg mover' rather than a 'back mover'.

Let's be clear – horses did not choose to be ridden. The purpose of a saddle is to distribute the weight of the rider over the saddle support area while balancing the rider over the centre of gravity of the horse. There are eight (at least) contributors which affect the centre of gravity of your horse and resulting in altering the balance of the saddle and rider. You as the rider, your trainer, your veterinarian, your body workers (physiotherapists, chiropractors, etc.), your horse's feed (nutritional supplements included), the age and condition (health) of your horse, and your farrier (blacksmith) – and last but not least, your tack (including bridle, girth, and saddle) all need to work together.



The horse's natural unevenness is influenced by how he stands when he grazes and generally the majority of horses will be more genetically heavily muscled on the left. The saddle will naturally fall into the hollow (right) side unless it is able to be fitted properly to accommodate this natural unevenness on-site (just as the farrier shoes on-site to ensure proper fit). If this is not done, the saddle will gravitate to a more diagonal position, sitting on the spine – resulting in the horse hollowing his back in an attempt to alleviate the pain of a badly fitting (because it's twisted) saddle.

That having been said, there is also one part of this equation which is often neglected – the importance of the saddle fit to the rider. Often riders say "I don't care if I'm not that comfortable; main thing is it needs to fit my horse". In actual fact, it is much easier to fit a saddle to a horse than to a rider; there are many more measurements and conformational relationships which come into play in ensuring that the rider is actually in a saddle which fits, which is comfortable and balanced, and which allows him/her to concentrate on riding, rather than fighting the saddle to get into the proper, comfortable position. It is a fact we have discovered, that no matter how well a saddle may fit a horse, if a woman is riding in a saddle made for a



of the behavioral and physical manifestations resulting from poor saddle fit, but with all these problems potentially caused by an ill-fitting saddle as the result of an ever-changing three dimensional horse's back, you might well ask yourself "why even bother using a saddle"? Why not treeless, or even bareback – like the Indians used to do! The tree is there to protect and support the horse's and the rider's back – but will only do so if the rider can use the four natural curves of his spine, which is only possible in a saddle with a well-balanced and fitted tree – in all aspects, to both sexes.

I'll discuss the treed/treeless controversy in future articles.

man, the horse will not be working to its full potential, because it will feel the rider fighting the saddle. Women riding in male saddles will for the most part experience discomfort that will translate down to the horse – for many reasons. Even if all of the 8 parts of the circle are working together optimally and everything is as perfect as it can possibly be, the balance will be off if at the end of the day the saddle (made for a man) is being ridden by a woman.

Saddle fit really is nothing more than trying to protect horse and rider from long term damage by staying away from the negative reflex points of both while distributing the rider's weight in a balanced fashion over the horse's entire saddle support area. Each of the professionals within the circle of influence should work together with this ultimate goal of keeping the horse and rider healthy, but the paradox is here that any change – positive or negative - attributed to any one of the circle, will have a negative effect on saddle balance. It is not actually the saddle which changes; it is the horse which will change in its three-dimensional saddle support area – and that's what officers knew 100+ years ago required the necessary rebalancing over and over again. It is without exaggeration the saddle (the interface between horse and rider) which can immediately cause the most damage to the horse if the balance is off – remember Newton's law of physics that each action has an equal and opposite reaction. While not entirely adhering to this law in its purest form, the point is that any action by one of the 'pieces of the pie' will cause a reaction in the balance of the saddle. Keep in mind that some saddles can have the trees adjusted on-site whereas others need to be completely replaced to achieve the continuing balance.

We have discussed the nine points of saddle fit previously and also gone into some



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