



SADDLE FIT AND THE YOUNG HORSE

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This is a fitting article (no pun intended!) to tie in with this issue's theme of foals. Too often we hear of people not wanting to spend the money on a good (i.e. adjustable) saddle for a young horse until they are actually starting to show with them – but the truth is that you may end up doing more damage to the horse's back by using a saddle that hasn't been (or can't be) fitted properly from the get go! It's almost as bad as putting shoes on your toddler that are much too big ("she'll grow into them") or starting the horse off with piaffe before they're ready. The damage may not be obvious at first, but trust me – it will manifest itself in later years!

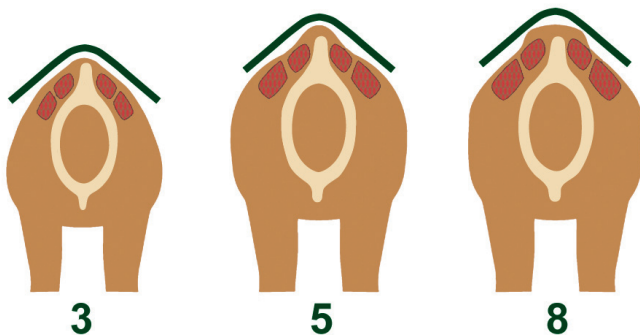
Let's speak to the elephant in the room for starters: horses were never meant to be ridden. This is an artificial construct we have subjected them to over the years and really goes totally against their nature. Horses are flight animals and their instinct is to flee – especially when something is placed on their back. If you've ever

watched horses being 'broken in' (and I truly dislike that term) then you can see their instinctive reactions the first time they have a saddle put on their backs. For them, this load on their back is like a cougar pouncing, and their instinct is to start running away.

The horse's skeletal structure can be compared to a suspension bridge. The supporting posts are the front and hind legs and the suspension cables are the ligaments of the back and neck. The horse can support the weight of the rider when the horse brings the hind legs 'underneath' him and closer to the forelegs – which allows the back to come up to form an 'arch' between the legs. As riders we want to maintain back health to allow the horse to bring his back up and his hind legs under him in order to be able to carry our weight.

The shoulder blades on a trained and mature horse (as opposed to a younger animal) are high-

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Training during these years will affect the muscular conformation and as a result the 3-dimensional back shape and the saddle support area will change.

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er and rotated more to the rear, which means that the front of the horse's saddle support area has moved back. (The saddle support area usually begins behind the shoulder blade at the base of the withers to the 18th thoracic vertebra). This maturation process actually reduces the size of the saddle support area — which leads to a problem in saddle fitting. We have often fitted a beautiful, custom-made saddle to a fairly young horse (maybe 5 or 6) taking all aspects of the equine anatomy into consideration (gullet width, tree length, channel width, etc.), when all of a sudden at age 10 the saddle is deemed too long for the horse's back. Without recognizing exactly this phenomenon of growth, it can become difficult to justify a recommendation made only a few short years ago, but the fact is that the horse will change conformation pretty radically at ages 3, 5, and 8 (see diagram).

The domestication of horses over the years has come to allow them to trust us — after the proper relationship building of trust and correct training — to ride them without significant danger to either party. However, there are situations where the instinctive behaviour of the horse will prevail — and one of these occurs when faced with a poorly

fitting saddle. If the saddle pinches at the withers (because the tree width is too narrow and/or the tree angle is too wide) this can seem like the vise grip of the stallion's bite. In nature, the stallion's bite at the base of the withers on the trapezius is meant to immobilize the mare during mating (causing her to stand still, drop her back, and rotate her pelvis). Not what you want when you're riding, but this is the effect you can achieve with a pinching saddle. The horse reflexively stands still; the rider is on top urging him forward — the result is then "my horse is stubborn!" (But that's the topic of a whole other article on behavioural ramifications of poorly fitting saddles!)

A saddle that is too narrow in the gullet channel or too long onto the lumbar area can cause the same effect as a predator landing on the horse's back — the reflex and the instinct is too run; again 'behavioural issues' resulting from poorly fitting saddles.


Conventional equestrian wisdom states that three years is the optimum age for a horse to get started under saddle — to get accustomed to the saddle and the weight of the rider — but serious training should not really begin until age five (and don't even get me started on race horse practices...that is practically child abuse). At around age 8 a well-trained horse will have the necessary muscles and conformation to begin training in earnest. Which brings us back to the question of when is the right time to invest in a proper saddle. The fact is that a horse's muscles will not develop properly if the saddle doesn't fit well, and can even atrophy. The paradox here is that sometimes riders are unable to sit when the horse is moving completely freely under saddle. Therefore, they don't mind that the (badly fitting) saddle inhibits this — which can become a catch-22. The saddle doesn't really fit the horse, which inhibits the correct and complete development of the muscles, which means that the saddle fitter doesn't need to come out as often to adjust the saddle because the conformation hasn't really changed. At what cost to the horse? Some people brag about 'their saddle has never had to be adjusted' but these basically hang on the spine like a clothespin and sit on the shoulders so that 'fit' is truly questionable.

The positive results of training a young horse should show a visible change in muscle conformation, which is what a well-fitting saddle will support. A horse will continue to change over the course of its entire life — due to various influences. But we need to be cognizant of

the fact that our training actually goes against what nature intended: we try to move the horse's natural centre of gravity further back and we work against the natural asymmetry in order to allow him to carry a rider over long periods of time. An ill-fitting saddle will impact your ability to achieve shifting the horse's weight from the forehand to the hindquarters, lifting the ribcage (which improves oxygen intake) and increasing his stamina. Correct riding as determined by the guidelines of classical dressage is the basis for horse-friendly methodology and training success. A poorly fitting saddle can impact all efforts of proper training methods as easily as poor riding itself.

Here are a couple of pointers to tell you when the horse has had enough training to be able to carry a rider in balance without damaging his back:

- The horse's shoulder blade has come up and back and is very defined and wide when viewed from the front (good pectoral musculing);
- The horse has a well-muscled neck, stronger on top from the poll to the withers and less so from the jawbone to the transition into the chest;
- The trapezius (withers muscle) is well developed and defined behind the shoulder blade, with visible and defined longissimus (back muscles) and lats.

So enjoy your youngsters and let them just be horses for a few years! 

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