

SADDLE SENSE

Saddle fitting to the horse and rider is an immensely personal and unique experience — no two pairs are the same! We asked some of the experts for some input regarding the process, or to discuss items of importance to them as they fit their saddles — their methods can be as unique and different as their clients are, and giving our readers/ riders broader knowledge can only help in determining what the right selection for them and their horses is.



THE 9 POINTS OF SADDLE FIT

by Jochen Schleese

As we head into spring, it's time to put our thoughts into ensuring that all of our tack and equipment will work for the upcoming training months, and for the shows we intend to compete in. Especially if your horse has been 'laid off' for the winter months, you will need to ensure that the saddle is fitted properly to allow him comfort and freedom to muscle up again when you begin training in earnest. While it can take four weeks for a muscle to build up with consistent training, it takes only one week for the muscle to lose its original shape (which is negative development). Thus, even if you have given your horse just a week off from training, you will find that your saddle may not fit the way it did and the way it should, so you should have a diagnostic evaluation done and the saddle adjusted by a certified fitter before you begin training again.

A quick diagnostic can be done using our 9 points of saddle fit evaluation.

1. SADDLE BALANCE

A saddle too high in the pommel and too low in the cantle causes pressure on the horse's back. It will be very difficult for your horse to engage his back because too much of your weight is on his last 2 floating ribs.

If too low in the front, it will pinch into the horse's shoulder — very restrictive for your horse. Your saddle is too high in the back so your leg goes forward and you fall into a chair seat to balance. The pommel and cantle should be level.

2. WITHER CLEARANCE

The saddle should have 2-3 fingers clearance on the top and around the side of the withers to accommodate the shoulder rotation upwards and backwards during movement.

A horse whose saddle pinches his withers may be reluctant to go forward. More extreme signs of insufficient wither clearance are patches of white hairs or sores on the top or on the sides of the withers.

3. CHANNEL/GULLET WIDTH

A channel or gullet that is too narrow or too wide can cause permanent damage to your horse's back. The width of the spine determines how wide his saddle's gullet must be, which should be the same throughout the entire length.

4. FULL PANEL CONTACT

The panels should make even contact with your horse's back all the way down to distribute the rider's weight evenly. Ensure that it doesn't bridge or rock.

5. BILLET ALIGNMENT

Billets should hang perpendicular to the ground in the girth area. Too far back and gravity will pull the billets (and the saddle) forward into the girth area. The girth always finds its position at the narrowest point of the rib cage.

Billets hanging too far forward into your horse's elbow area may make him sore in the elbows. Gravity will drag them (with the girth and saddle) back into the girth area, resulting in too much pressure on the panels at the rear.

6. SADDLE STRAIGHTNESS

The center of the saddle should be in alignment with your horse's spine. Most horses have a left shoulder that is larger and more developed than the right. The larger shoulder kicks the saddle over to the other side during motion.

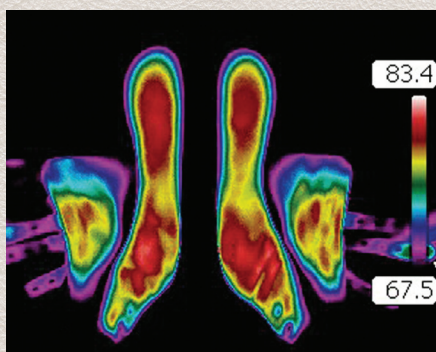
A rider who sits unevenly can compress the stuffing more on one side of the saddle, dragging it over to that side.

7. SADDLE LENGTH

The length of the saddle support area determines the panel length. The saddle must sit behind the shoulder. If too long, it can get driven forward into the shoulder. The saddle should not extend past the 18th thoracic vertebra.

8. TREE ANGLE

The angle of the tree (at the tree points for the gullet plate) must match the angle of the horse's shoulder. During movement the shoulder rotates upward and backwards. The angle of



This thermographic image shows a saddle with panels that bridge front to back, resulting in greater pressure at the pommel and cantle areas.

the piping on the saddle should match the angle of your horse's shoulder.

9. TREE WIDTH

The tree width must be wide enough for the horse's shoulders to move freely.

If too wide, the entire saddle may rock or slip from side to side when ridden, or the back of the saddle may twist to one side.

Tree width and tree angle need to be adjusted together. Changing the flocking from the vertical panels won't solve the problem — the gullet plate needs adjustment. Some self-adjustable gullet plates will accommodate angle adjustment, but won't allow width adjustment (over the wither area).

Hopefully these basic tips will help you get ready for a successful show season while ensuring your horse has the freedom to perform at its potential! Happy Riding!

By Jochen Schleese, CMS, CSFT, CSE. ©2016 Saddlefit 4 Life. All Rights Reserved



The angle of this saddle is the same as the shoulder angle of the horse.