

Saddle Fit For the Changing Horse

By Jochen Schleese, CMS, CSFT, CSE
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A horse will change its conformation over the course of his life due to many influences. Consider a circle surrounding the horse divided into equal pieces with a minimum of eight at any given time. Only one of these pieces represents the rider; other components include the trainer, the veterinarian, other body workers, nutrition, the blacksmith, the horse's age and condition, and the tack – including bits, bridles, girths, saddles and pads. The saddle and the work of the saddle fitter must never be considered in isolation, since all of the pieces of the circle of influence are interdependent. If the training methods or the horse's nutrition are altered, the horse's conformation will change. It follows logically that the saddle will no longer fit – and the reason is not because the saddle fitter did a bad job, but because the horse's back shape has been altered.

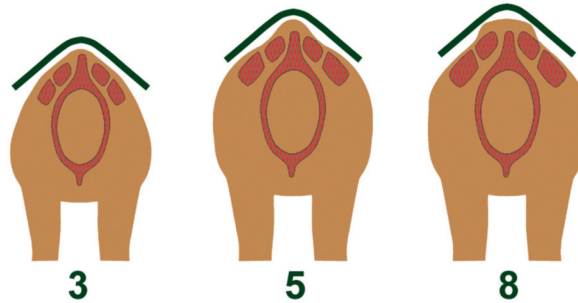
Saddle fitting is an attempt to prevent long term damage to the horse's back by alleviating pressure on the reflex points, and to distribute the rider's weight optimally over its back. Keeping the horse sound and the rider healthy should be the ultimate goal for everyone in the circle of

influence. All need to work together cooperatively to achieve this. Any change affected by one of the pieces in the circle (positive or negative) will have a consequence on the others – with the simple result visually that the saddle may no longer be balanced properly or fit correctly.

It is a given that over the course of a horse's life he will actually change his three-dimensional back shape many times. Just like humans – as we grow up our bodies change; as we exercise or train our bodies definitely change; and as we age or change the way we eat, our bodies change. Any of these changes may throw off the fit of the saddle to the horse, depending on how extreme the change has been.

All things being equal, the shape of the horse's back, and especially the length of the saddle support area (from the base of the withers to the last thoracic vertebra), will change most significantly at ages 3, 5 and 8. This can cause frustration for the rider as it will definitely require a saddle fit adjustment to accommodate wider shoulders, higher withers, and more muscling on the back. We suggest annual maintenance check-ups and tune ups regardless; this frequency will increase if there are extenuating circumstances, such as increased training, changed nutrition, or any of the factors in the circle which can ultimately affect saddle fit.

One of the problems with buying a "custom" saddle is often the inference and the expectation of an uneducated rider that this saddle is going to fit "as is" for the rest of the horse's life. This seems a bit silly if you consider that even a car needs regular servicing and maintenance – and this is a hunk of steel without having to work as an



ongoing interface between two living beings. Even a saddle which has been regularly maintained and serviced, which was purchased for a young horse a few years ago, may often have to be completely exchanged simply because the saddle support area has grown smaller as the horse has matured and the saddle is now simply too long for the horse's back!

The shoulders have muscled up and physically moved further upwards and backwards – which simply means that the saddle placement behind the shoulder (as usual) means that it is already further back by a couple of inches and now encroaches past the last thoracic vertebrae to impinge on the kidneys or ovaries. This is the area which has what we call the "bucking reflex" – which is a commonly seen result.

You may not always have immediate access to your saddle fitter, and as such, there are some 'band aid' solutions available. Some are probably more feasible than others, but you do have options:

- Stop riding your horse until the saddle can be checked and refitted
- Use shims in your saddle pad (gel pads with the pockets to fit shims front and back on both sides as needed are a good temporary expedient to avoid hurting your horse)
- Lunge your horse to exercise him
- Try a different saddle or bareback pad for a few days

It is probably safe to say that saddle fit should be checked minimally once a year, and more often if there are other things going on in your horse's life. It is never a good idea to ride him in a poorly fitting saddle for an extended period of time. Of all of the pieces of the circle, it is the saddle (as interface between horse and rider) which has the potential to actually inflict the most physiological damage.



The cross-hatched area shows the saddle support area of this horse's back. Any part of the saddle should definitely stay off the red triangle at the front.

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