

TRAINING & SHOWING

Saddle Fit: Dust Patterns and Sweat Marks

One of the most *misunderstood* indicators of saddle fit

– GOOD OR BAD –

are the *sweat* or dust marks left behind after a ride and when the pad has been removed.

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Logic dictates that the dust pattern on your pad and the sweat marks on your horse should ideally look somewhat like the photo below. The most dirt is accumulated where the most movement is: in the front shoulder moving back and forth and in the back, where the back moves up and down. The quick explanation is that no dirt should show where the saddle hardly touches, such as the gullet or at the transition between sweat flap and panel.

The white triangle under the front part of the saddle also indicates a good position and fit, because in this area the saddle should sit the most quietly without movement, since this is where most of your weight sits; i.e. no dirt accumulation and no movement.

In nature, the horse carries the most weight on the forehand (60%) and if the rider mounts the horse this increases to about 75%. The reason why we want this white triangle in the saddle pad - it indicates that all effort has been made to free up the front and the back of the saddle so the horse can bring up its back, engaging the hindquarters. The first step for the horse to shift the weight from the forehand to the back hand is to have this ability to bring up his back. Only then can he "pivot" his pelvis and step under with the hindquarters. By doing so, the horse is able to shift the weight from the forehand to the hindquarters, come up in front of the shoulder, and move freer and jump higher. Most of the movement on the saddle pad should show at the shoulder (front) and at the back, not under the triangle.

Horses do sweat just like humans in order to regulate their body temperature. The horse's back actually has only a few sweat glands; most of them are found along his sides, at the neck or flank - areas that have a broad and open surface to allow the natural influence of air and wind to cool the body with the help of sweat. (This is why the large saddle flaps - the bottom flap when there are two; the monoflap when there is one - are called sweat flaps.)

Let's use the analogy of comparing the saddle pad to a white dress shirt. Whether the dress shirt fits or not (is too small, too tight, by a couple of sizes), the most dirt will still accumulate at the neck, where most of the dust from the outer environment, the 'pressure' or touch from the skin to the shirt occur. The least amount of visible dirt will be where the shirt is pressed snugly against the body. With the saddle being the snugest fit under the tree points and the stirrup bar (same as the dress shirt on the shoulders of a human body) this is where the least amount of dust from the outer environment will accumulate. (Here is

where the least amount of friction due to movement between skin/fur and material will occur). Large kidney-shaped (6-8" long) dry spots are acceptable under the stirrup bar, but dry spots found on the saddle-support area with a circumference of approximately one inch actually indicate points of concentrated pressure from lumpy flocking.

Most English saddle trees have a slight curvature on the bottom of the tree (slight 'rock') to allow the saddle manufacturer to put more panel flocking underneath the cantle and the tree point/stirrup bar area to give the horse the maximum cushioning in these areas. The challenge of the saddle fitter and the saddle owner is to create the right amount of tree width to inhibit a large amount of 'rock' which irritates the horse, can cause hair loss or misinterpret aids due to too much movement between saddle and rider. Certainly we could go with an extremely wide tree and over-padding with additional saddle pads, but how many athletes do you know that would wear a large amount of underpants or many pairs of socks in their skates or running shoes in order to accommodate a proper fit in too-large pants or foot wear?

Why do top riders in all English disciplines prefer not to use this proposed solution of extra wide trees with extra padding if this is the ultimate answer? It would make life ever so much simpler for the saddle fitter, saddle manufacturer, trainer, rider, horse, etc. Logic dictates that if this were truly the solution the whole industry would follow this current fad, but the truth is that the preference is to get horse and rider as close as possible to each other using the saddle as the interface to allow maximum communication and aids without impeding performance capability and creating long term damage. The saddle pad should be used only for what it was intended to do - to protect the leather from the horse's sweat - on an English saddle. In some parts of Europe people don't even use saddle pads. The comfort for the animal is in the properly fitted saddle panel, not in the pad on an English saddle. In the Western saddle on the other hand, where the tree is straighter and larger, (and there is no protection) only a thin fleece is nailed to the bottom so that the (navajo) pad doesn't slide around. This pad is the horse's padding on a larger, straighter, and more weight-bearing tree.

Dust patterns as indicators of saddle fit are still somewhat arbitrary and unreliable since there are too many variables influencing interpretation (movement of the saddle pad if the saddle is too big, saddle pad can slip, be incorrectly seamed, etc.) It is still best to have a qualified fitter out to assess what is actually going on.