

# SADDLE FIT AND CUSTOM SADDLES

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**W**hat does 'custom' really mean? What does 'quality' entail? The concept of 'custom saddles' really needs to be defined, as it there is so much more to a custom saddle than just a type. The concept of a truly 'bespoke' product should be honoured – when a saddle is described as 'custom', it really should be just that, and we will clarify the difference here.

Simply purchasing a saddle that may have been 'customized' to fit your horse with a narrow, medium, or wide tree and panel flocking that has been somewhat moved around to accommodate the horse's back shape does not a custom product make. Neither does your determination of seat size (anywhere from 16" to maybe 19") with special colour combinations and bling or leather types of your choice. There is nothing truly custom about these superficial choices. These are personalized options that absolutely will be according to your tastes and requests, however, true customization begins inside the saddle with the tree itself.

For a truly custom saddle, the considerations (particularly for a Dressage saddle) need to go beyond those mentioned above to include:

- Twist (that part of the saddle that you feel between your upper inner thigh) – to accommodate the articulation of the hip bones to allow the leg to hang straight.

- Stirrup bar placement (women tend to need extended stirrup bars to allow their legs to hand straight because most women's upper legs are longer than their lower legs which causes them to have a centre of gravity further forward and tends towards the 'chair seat' position).
- Cantle height to accommodate both the size and position of the gluteus (butt) muscles.
- Seat foam (some women will need more of a 'push' from behind to allow them to sit without collapsing back into the saddle because again of the size and shape of the female gluteus muscle and length of the tailbone).
- Flap length and position to ensure proper placement of the leg (in front and behind the leg there should be even amounts of flap showing).

Customization begins with the tree. The top of the saddle is made to fit the rider and the bottom is made to fit the horse. It is actually much easier to fit the horse than the rider, because the points mentioned above are still only a part of what true customization entails. For the horse you will want to ensure that the following is taken into consideration:

- Forward facing tree points (to avoid scapular damage during movement).
- Enough clearance at the top and the sides

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Various stages of preparation of the final seat curve addressing the important aspects of the width of twist along with the amount of seat foam support at the back which could be straight, cupped or perhaps convex in shape depending on the particular rider's preferences and requirements.

of the withers to allow complete freedom of movement.

- Proper angulation of the gullet plate to allow the shoulders to 'slide through' when moving
- Asymmetric adjustability at the gullet plate to accommodate the horse's larger shoulder if necessary to avoid saddle slip during movement.
- A gullet channel which is the proper width for a particular horse's spinal processes.
- Saddle length no longer than the saddle support area.
- Adjustable panel stuffing in the proper shape for the horse's three-dimensional back.

### HOW CAN YOU TELL IF YOUR SADDLE IS "QUALITY" AND WILL HAVE A GOOD RESALE VALUE?

The difficulty of defining quality is that people tend to associate it with a high price tag. This shouldn't always be the case, but in many cases it is true that you get what you pay for.

When building a quality brand, you should be able to easily recognize it and the company logo from a distance. You can see it, feel it and you don't necessarily need to be an expert to recognize what you are looking at. Branding helps create the desire to really want it.

People are often pleasantly surprised to realize the affordability when all associated expenses with a poorly fitting saddle are considered. A well-made and properly fitting saddle for both horse and riders can save literally thousands of dollars in veterinarian and physiotherapy bills for both. Maintenance fees (i.e., annual diagnostics and adjustment fees) are relatively small in the big picture.

To build a brand based on high quality is hard work. You have to remain constant in the eyes of the customer in your product, service and branding. The competition never sleeps and there are certainly enough alternatives available! Although it is deemed a huge compliment to be imitated, it also means staying one step ahead with constant innovation. It is definitely a constant uphill climb to ensure that marketing strategies don't contradict or



The HorseShape scanner replicates the exact shape of the horse's back and is used here to take just some of the many preliminary measurements necessary to build a saddle customized for any horse's unique requirements. Building a great saddle starts from the ground up or in our trade 'the tree up'.

jeopardize the brand for the need of a quick sale. We personally don't ever deal with the ethical and moral dilemma of selling something which goes against our philosophy of protecting horse and rider against long term damage. (Having said that, however – you can subscribe to this philosophy even if you ride a well-fitting inexpensive saddle – recognizing that you will probably have to buy another one every couple of years as your horse changes).

Price shouldn't compromise quality or the health of your horse. What is the point of having a designer suit that doesn't fit? You may look good in it, it might be 'en vogue' right now, but if your suit is too small or too tight, big or baggy, you won't feel your best and you can't move with the freedom you would like to. This is exactly how your horse will feel, especially in 6-8 months' time when his shape changes and you aren't able to adjust the saddle to fit - you also need the service and the knowledge of equine back health to be able to adjust the saddle to make it fit again.

Why buy disposable, when you can invest in the highest quality saddle, service and industry knowledge at a similar price point? The aim is for each customer and horse to be happy - not just now but for many years to come.

*"In order for one to be irreplaceable, one must always be different."* — Coco Chanel.

Happy Riding! 🐾

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