Saddle-fitting is not just about fitting the horse; women have unique issues related to anatomy and saddles with too wide a "twist" (upper thigh area) can cause discomfort and compensation in position.

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Top 9 Saddle Fitting Problems

A trio of Canadian experts divulge their most common saddle fit issues and how to fix them

BY NICOLE KITCHENER

Saddle fitters encounter a multitude of issues in their mission to help horses and equestrians achieve riding comfort, balance, freedom of movement, and optimal performance. But some problems emerge more frequently than others. Three of Canada's top saddle fitters share the three fitting concerns they confront most frequently.

SCHLEESE SADDLERY

1. Saddle Too Far Forward

Located between the base of the withers and the last rib, the saddle support area is the only part of the horse's back that can handle the weight of saddle and rider. But saddles are often too long for the saddle support area and, "during motion, the back movement tends to move the saddle forward onto the shoulder," says Sabine Schleese, director of corporate affairs for Schleese Saddlery (and Jochen's wife). The rider will correspondingly be thrown behind the horse's centre of gravity, further thrusting the saddle forward.

Billet strap misalignment can also create frontward slippage. "When the girth is done up, it will naturally seek the narrowest spot [of the ribcage] behind the elbow," says Sabine. The billets should hang perpendicular to the ground at the horse's girth line. Too far back and gravity will pull the girth into that spot, bringing the saddle with it.

In addition, says Sabine, "The angle of the tree, the gullet and the tree points need to be parallel to the angle of the shoulders, not the withers, as is often believed to be the case." This allows the shoulder and the tree point to glide easily past each other like a sliding door.

"If the saddle doesn't fit the horse properly at the withers and the shoulders, every time the shoulder comes back, it will hitch against the tree point and push the saddle forward."

Solution: The saddle needs to be properly adjusted at the gullet plate (if possible); otherwise, a different saddle would be the answer.

2. Saddle Doesn't Fit the Female Form

Proper saddle fit is especially important for females, many of whom use male-model designs, says Sabine. "If your saddle is not

built to accommodate you – and it doesn't have to be a custom saddle, it just needs to be a saddle that has a female anatomy in mind – then you'll be fighting the saddle instead of it helping your riding. And your horse will feel any discomfort you have."

Most male-oriented saddles have a much wider twist – the part of the saddle between the upper inner thighs. Women generally have less space here than men and their muscles tend to be located all around the leg, not on top and behind, like men. This means women are "automatically being pulled apart at the hips; their legs are being pulled outward." They collapse at the hips to escape pain and shoot their legs forward. To achieve the classic shoulder-hip-heel alignment without discomfort, women use two seat bones plus the pubic symphysis (a joint between the pubic bones) almost like a tripod, whereas men can balance on their seat bones alone.

Solution: Because women's butt muscles (glutes) are higher, extra cantle padding helps the rider from falling into a chair seat. Extended stirrup bars will help place the rider's leg into the proper position (most women have longer upper legs than lower legs and this will help them to fall 'naturally' into the proper, balanced spot.) Your saddle should have proper twist for your specific requirements; if it is too wide it will never allow you to sit comfortably.

3. Saddle Slips to One Side

Horses are inherently asymmetrically built. Most are "left-handed," therefore, their muscles are usually better developed on that side. That means if the left shoulder is larger, it will hitch the saddle over to right when the horse moves,impinging on the horse's muscles, nerves and ligaments. To feel straight and balanced, the rider will lean heavier on one stirrup or bend at the hip, exacerbating the situation.

Solution: Schleese fitters will accommodate for the asymmetry, sometimes to industry criticism. "When we've fitted a saddle to a horse that needs it and for whatever reason the saddle gets sold. Then another saddle fitter goes in and says, 'Oh my God, your saddle is crooked.' Well it's not. There was a reason it's been fitted asymmetrically and it's a temporary, interim solution."

Sabine calls the issue "contentious" and reveals Schleese Saddlery and Dr. Katrina Merkies of the Equine Sciences faculty at the University of Guelph's Ontario Agricultural College are currently in discussions to conduct a joint research study to prove that a saddle not adjusted for asymmetry causes a horse stress.

Since 1986, when Jochen Schleese first began manufacturing saddles, Schleese Saddlery Service of Holland Landing, ON, has been at the forefront of English saddle fitting technology and education, particularly when it comes to female equestrians. schleese.com

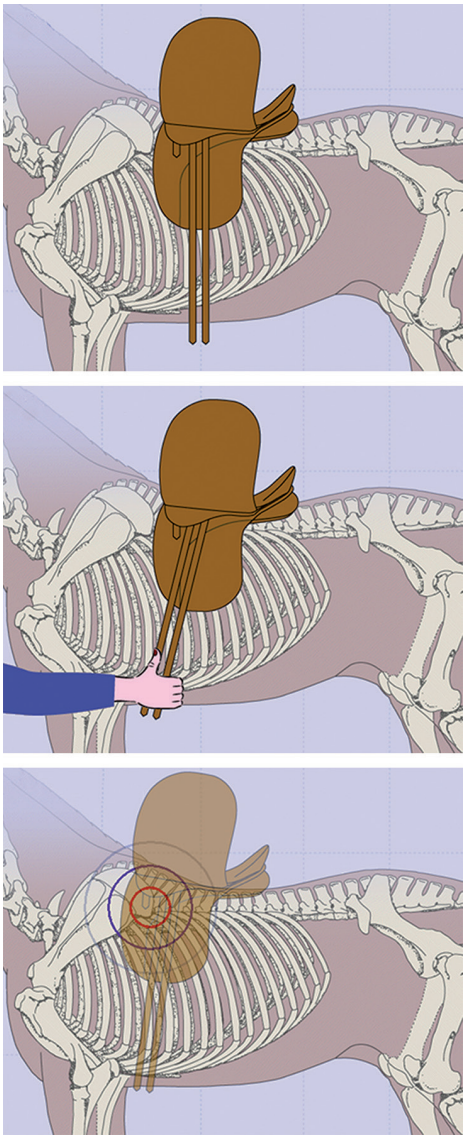
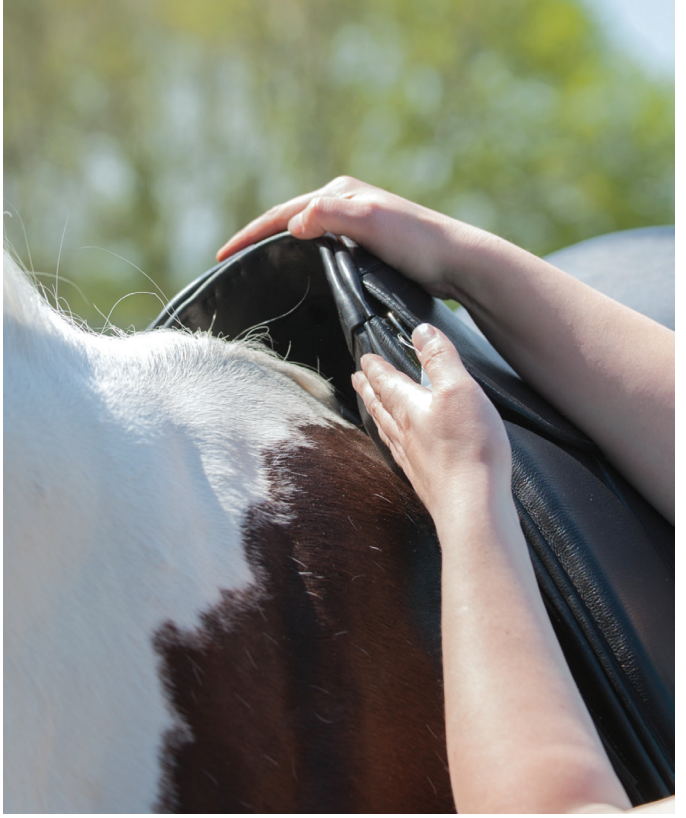


IMAGE COURTESY SCHLEESE SADDLERY

(LEFT) When the billets are not positioned correctly on the saddle, the saddle will slide forward, which can cause damage to the horse's shoulder from the gullet plate and tree points.

(BOTTOM) Horses tend to be stronger on the left side, causing the saddle to hitch to the right while the rider struggles to stay upright and straight.



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Insufficient clearance at the pommel not only potentially causes pain and injury for the horse, it can also interfere with shoulder and leg movement and prevent adequate rotation and lift of the withers during movement.

NICOLE KITCHENER PHOTO

The red line indicates the rocker, which is the curve on the panel from front to back. Saddler Vickie Keam warns that too much rocker or overflocking can discourage collection, because the horse wants to move away from the pressure.

VICKIE KEAM

1. Insufficient Wither Clearance

Vickie says wither entrapment is the most prevalent fitting issue she confronts. Insufficient space at the saddle front creates pinching, inhibits movement of the leg and shoulders and even affects rotation of the withers.

"When the horse is standing perfectly straight in neutral and they side bend their head to the left or right, each vertebra in their spine rotates."

Vickie likens the movement to a train bending. "There has to be a roll to it for it to be accomplished," she says. "If you have too much padding, too many blankets or just the saddle itself pulled down on the withers, the withers can't rotate properly.

The horse also needs room up front to lift the withers during collection.

Solution: Vickie suggests a minimum 2.5 to 4 cm (between 1 and 1 5/8") clearance between the top of the wither and the pommel and a critical 3 cm (1 1/4") clearance on both sides of the withers as well.

2. Twisted Saddles

Vickie says she often finds twisted saddles – where the front is angled in one direction and the back in another. She says it's a quality control issue in many cases, as some manufacturers build saddles around trees that are crooked in construction.

"Years ago, I was told, 'Don't open this can of worms.' But it's been going on too long without the manufacturers fixing things. It's not just English. It's throughout the whole industry. The tree makers need to step up and taking responsibility for these animal's lives that they're hurting."

According to Vickie, many manufacturers try to "cover their butts" by blaming the horse's anatomy and musculature for creating the twists. "This doesn't come from riding. This doesn't come from the horses. I see it in brand-new saddles."

While the problem is generally worse in cheaper saddles, she says, it's not always the case, "I bought a custom tree for $1,000 and it was still crooked."

Solution: If the twist is not affecting the rider's seat, a change of flocking to balance it can help, but it needs to be regularly checked.

3. Too Much Rocker

The rocker is the curve on the saddle panel from front to back. If there is too much rocker or overflocking, says Vickie, the horse's ability to round his back is restricted. With no place for the back to go, the saddle presses against the horse. Because he will move away from the pressure, "he doesn't really collect," she explains.

Often a taboo word in saddle circles, 'bridging' refers to a situation where there is little to no contact along the panels through the middle of the saddle, but pressure on both the front and back edges. However, Vickie says she likes to provide "a handful" of bridging at the lowest part of the saddle to allow the horse lift his back.

Solution: "It's an easy fix. You go in, take out some flocking, and then there's a little less push on the horse."

Southern Alberta's Vickie Keam has built custom and English and Western saddles since 1999. Seeking a better understanding of anatomy in relation to saddle fitting, she became an equine osteotherapist five years ago, and has since studied several other hands-on therapies. horse-therapy.ca

LESLEY MCGILL

1. Saddle Sitting Too Low in Front

Lesley says most saddles need to be "lifted up" in the front because it takes the brunt of daily use and the flocking here is used the most. While it's not a problem, per se, she says it's the most common saddle maintenance she performs. "Without it I wouldn't have a job," she laughs.

A saddle tipping forward can make a rider feel unbalanced or as if their saddle is too small. Some will even perch and hit their crotch. The horse might not move as well because his shoulders are inhibited by the tree.

Solution: "It's so easily remedied with new flocking. Even if your saddle tree is exactly correct to your horse, the flocking is what's keeping it up and evenly off his shoulders. Once that flocking is broken down, the back of the saddle will still have its normal amount of flocking, so your teeter-totter effect makes all the pressure end up at the front."

2. Saddle Too Small for the Rider

Lesley says many individuals ride in inappropriately-sized saddles. "A lot of people, when they were teenagers or young adults, rode in a 16 ½-inch saddle, and in their heads, they're still the same rider. Whether or not they weigh the same, they're *not* the same rider. Their proportions aren't the same."

This can have consequences for the horse. "A lot of times before I even look at the saddle, I palpate the horse and there are certain areas of the horse's back that will yell at me, saying the rider is sitting right there," she says. "Often, if a rider is in a saddle that's too small, they're not sitting in the 'sweet spot' or the centre of the saddle. They're sitting further back onto the cantle, tipping the saddle back so all the pressure ends up at the back of the tree and in front of the horse's loins. The horse gets quite sore."

Also, when a larger person sits in a too-small saddle, their weight is dispersed over a smaller area. "That's not fair on the horse," says Lesley.

Solution: "Putting a person in a bigger saddle, with bigger panels, will help the horse's back pain." And once they give it a try, riders like it too. "You put them in a saddle that fits and they're like, 'This is so much easier!'"

3. Inappropriate Girths

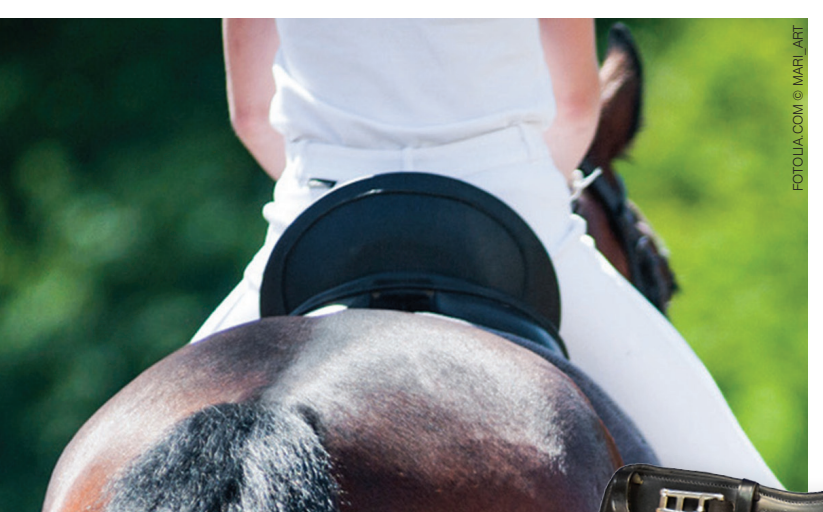
Using the right girth in the correct manner is "just as important as the saddle in a lot of cases," says Lesley. "I fix so many problems with girths that it's big on my radar."

Girth position is crucial. Both the saddle and the girth must line up with the horse's natural girth line, Lesley explains. "People try to put their girth wherever they think it belongs, or where they want it to go. The horse actually has a place where the girth goes. You can't argue with that. It's getting the right girth in the right place in the right line."

Horses have their own way of telling their riders that a problem stems from the girth, not the saddle – biting, collapsing, or holding their breath, for example. "If he's okay with you putting the saddle on and okay with everything else and the minute you go to put the girth on under his belly you see him get panicky or [exhibit] vices, that's the girth, not your saddle," says Lesley.

Solution: "Sometimes it's because their sternum is out, or it's pressure sores or ulcers or they're in heat." If you're unsure, a vet check might be in order. The girth might even be old and uncomfortable and need to be switched out for a newer one, or perhaps it's the wrong shape for the horse. "There are so many reasons they could be girthy and just changing the girth can make all the difference."

Langley, B.C.'s Lesley McGill, aka The Saddle Doctor, is one of only a handful of individuals in Canada qualified as saddle fitters through the Society of Master Saddlers, a stringent U.K.-based training and standards organization. thesaddledoctor.ca



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Saddle size is important: while too large can affect your centre of gravity, Lesley McGill most often sees adult riders trying to squeeze into the same seat size they rode in as teens.

A girthy horse may just need a new girth – there are many innovative new designs on the market that make front-end movement easier (such as this Shoulder Relief), or materials such as gel for maximum comfort.