Are You RIDING in a Saddle MADE for a Man?

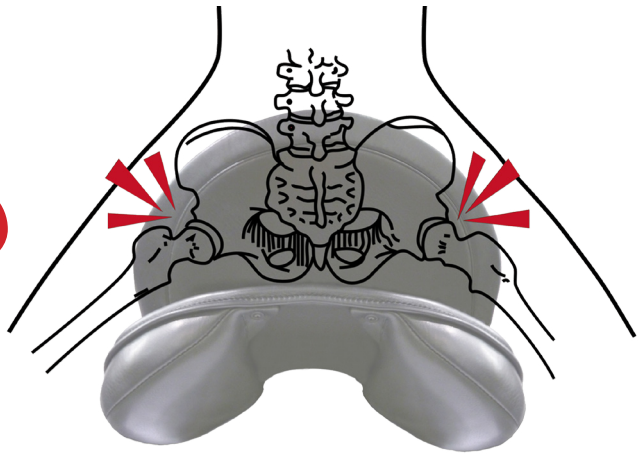


Image by Michelle J. Powell - Schleese Saddlery

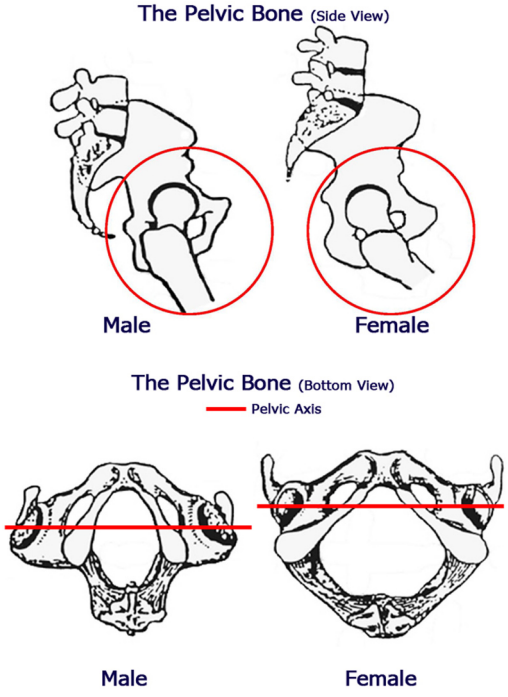
By Jochen Schleese,CMS, CSFT, CEE

This month's Q&A has spurred me to delve into this topic in a little more detail, as it is an issue that we have often heard from our clients (who are admittedly, mostly women!) Anatomy is a crucial factor in saddle fit, as is gender. Men usually have an easier time finding a saddle that fits, as saddles have traditionally been built by men, for men. Most women have an inherent conformational disadvantage (the centre axis of the pelvis prevents women from balancing only on their seat bones). With a saddle designed for the female anatomy (and exercises and muscular development) women can achieve a similar position on horseback to the male.

The female pelvis has a shorter tail bone and hip articulation angled to the side vs. the male pelvis with a longer tail bone and straighter hip articulation, allowing his leg to hang straight down.

Position and balance of the rider are key in all riding disciplines.

In dressage it's difficult for women to achieve the classic "shoulders-hips-heels" straight line, because the articulation of the femur is different than a man's. the pubic bone. As a result, most women collapse at the hip (into a chair seat) to escape the pain. The leg shoots forward, and women end up fighting the position instead of concentrating on riding. For most males, the upper leg (femur) is pretty much the same length as the lower leg (tibia), so their legs will hang down straight using 'normal' stirrup bar placement. Most females' upper legs are longer than their lower legs, which causes them to hang forward and pull them into the chair position even more. For women, the stirrup bar generally needs to be extended to allow their legs to find their centre of gravity and prevent swinging like a pendulum.



Position and balance of the rider are key in all riding disciplines. The seat bones are the structure for the foundation of position and balance, but the gluteal muscles also play a role. Since a man's tailbone is longer and his glutes are lower, he will not need as much support 'behind' at the cantle as women may. The female may have to 'slouch' in order to get the same support from her saddle. This then leads to backache (and pressure on L4 L5 discs) because the natural four curves in her spine cannot be properly used as the shock absorbers as nature intended.

Men have two "V" shaped seat bones set close together, giving them a bipod axis making it easy to balance comfortably. Saddle manufacturers have excelled in saddle designed for the male pelvis since more men than women rode.

Most saddleries do not understand the more complex requirements of the female rider. Unfortunately, too many women ride in saddles built for men – which cause issues such as "chair seat", pelvic discomfort, swinging leg, knees/ toes turned out. Women have a broad range of hip shapes, all of which need to be accommodated by the saddle. Unlike the "V" shaped man's seat bones, women's are usually flatter. Women have a more prominent and lower pubic bone. Her skeletal structure causes a woman to sit as on a tripod. Herein lies the problem for most women – unless the pelvis is straight, the pommel of the saddle will inevitably interfere with the pubic bone (causing pain); unless the abdominal muscles are used, it is almost impossible to sit balanced in a saddle – with the proper support from behind (of a higher cantle). While proper strengthening exercises and Pilates certainly help strengthen the core and will help – it almost doesn't really matter if you have a saddle that counteracts all your physical efforts to sit properly and in balance.

The traditional 'male' saddles are built fairly widely in the crotch area, but are narrow in the seat. Women find themselves sitting with their legs pushed outwards from the hip, and/or painfully sitting on the seat seaming. Anatomy dictates the structure for women should be exactly opposite – narrow in the crotch area (twist –the part of the saddle between the upper inner thigh) and wider in the seat area.

Most important - the rider should feel comfortable first, and then the saddle needs to be fitted to the horse (at various key performance indicators - gullet channel, the length, panels, tree angle and width etc.) If the saddle does not fit the rider it doesn't really matter how well the saddle fits the horse – he will never perform to his full capability as the rider's discomfort will be communicated.

Most dressage saddles have not evolved over the years, except cosmetically. Most companies (with a few exceptions) still use the same trees, the same technology, and the same manufacturing process as they always have. They have not adapted their product to meet the needs of the majority of riders who are female! If your saddle does not immediately put you on proper position and is totally comfortable, you may be riding in a saddle made for a man. As I have said before – riding shouldn't hurt. You shouldn't have to 'suck it up'. It can be comfortable and it can protect your body from pain – and especially as we all get older, these extra little aches and pains are something that nobody needs; least of all when you are doing something that is supposed to bring you pleasure!