

Fitting the Saddle to the Rider

When it comes time to purchase a saddle, how do you know that the saddle you spend several hundred to a few thousand dollars on will not only fit your horse, but also fit you? If you have ridden in more than one saddle in your riding career, you probably noticed that there were differences in each saddle. Perhaps they were subtle differences or major differences. But when you spend your dollars, you want a saddle that you and your horse will enjoy for years to come.

The most obvious differences are the length of the seat from pommel to cantle to accommodate the rider, and the width of the tree to accommodate the horse, but this is only the beginning. In speaking to master saddle fitters and saddle designers, you also learn about flap length, twist, seat width, thigh rolls or blocks, seat depth, stirrup bar placement, and what to do if your saddle comes with a third billet strap.

Deborah Witty, a SMS Qualified Saddle Fitter for Albion Saddles, states "We try to educate the people so they can become a good consumer."

Begin your search with what works for your horse as the primary concern. Saddle sizing in itself can be confusing. Your horse may not fit in a catalogs 'medium' tree or 'wide' tree. Witty points out that saddle trees come in numerous widths and saddle makers may measure sizing distance differently.

In other words, 'Medium' may not be the same width measurement from one saddle maker to another and '33 cm' may not be measured from the same points on the saddle from one company to another. So the first criteria that must be met is to make your horse comfortable. "Accomplish the fit of the horse and allow the horse and rider to work at the best of their ability."

Some saddles may be ruled out due to the horses conformation such as a particularly short back or the height of the withers. Saddle flocking need to be adjusted for horse with a club foot because of differences in musculature development in each shoulder. Horses that have a stiff and hollow side will have more muscle on the stiff side and less on the hollow side and will need more flocking on the hollow side to provide support for the saddle until the muscles are properly developed and equal sided flexibility is achieved. Any chronic back problems, current soreness, how much and where the horse lifts his back, and how much does the rider get the horse to use his back are also issues for proper flocking and therefore proper support for the saddle and comfort for the horse. Flocking needs to be reassessed as your horse matures and the musculature changes. Even the air support saddles need to be maintained regularly.

After the horse is fitted appropriately, the rider needs to be fitted. The best advice is 'ride in as many saddles as possible' to develop feel for the features that you do or do not like in a saddle. Remember that sitting in a saddle on a plastic mold or even on a stationary horse is not the same as riding a moving animal. Are you more comfortable in a deep seat or flatter seat? Do you like a medium twist or narrow twist or even an extra narrow twist? Are you aware of your three points of contact in your seat? How about the width of the saddle under you seat bones? How wide do you prefer to give you the support you need for flying changes of lead or the perfect half-pass? The placement and width of the thigh rolls can make a difference in comfort and security. Become aware of where your seat bones are, the tilt of your pelvis, the comfort or discomfort of the width of the saddle between your

upper thighs. Can you move in the saddle or do you feel wedged in? Are there particular corrections that your trainer consistently makes such as "sit up" or "bring your legs back"? Are your legs able to hang in proper alignment? As Carmi Weininger of Reactorpanel Saddle Company states, "There is a horse/ rider/ saddle triangle. Each has a critical relationship to the other two elements of the triangle. You can't remove one without collapsing of the structure. Body awareness is crucial."

Seat Length is dependent on the length of your leg from hip to knee. It is not a reflection of the size of your hips. Long legged riders need a longer seat to accommodate them since the leg is not straight down but flexed.

Seat depth is the length of seat surface that bears the riders weight. In a deep seat, it is shorter and helps to hold a rider in position. It may make it difficult to rise out of the saddle if needed as in trot work. With a deep seat, you may need a longer saddle seat length.

Seat twist is the width of saddle between the upper thighs, just under the pubic bone. The comfort of this may change with significant weight changes or child bearing.

Seat width is the width of the saddle beneath the seat bones. It needs to be wide enough to give the rider good support. You cannot balance if your seat bones keep slipping off the edge of the seat.

Thigh rolls (or blocks) help you maintain correct leg placement on the saddle. If the rolls are placed incorrectly to far back, your thigh will be pushed into too vertical a position; you will be tilted forward onto the front of your pelvis and be told "Sit up!" If the rolls are to far forward, your legs may move too far in front of you and place you in a 'chair' position, hence you are constantly being told, "Bring your legs underneath you. They are too far forward." Both positions prevent you from balancing correctly and following the motion of your horse. Both positions interfere with proper positioning of leg aids. A small adjustment can make a big difference. Some saddles come with moveable rolls and some rolls can be adjusted by changing the flocking.

Stirrup bars need to be placed so that your leg hangs down with your ear, shoulder, hip and heel are in line. If they are too far forward, again you sit in a chair position and are told to "bring you legs back." If they are too far back, your leg will be too vertical and you will be positioned forward onto the front of your pelvis. Incorrect positioning of the thigh roll and the stirrup bars create similar problems and prevent proper leg aids but placement of the stirrup bars cannot be changed except perhaps by the saddle maker.

The **flap length** of your saddle should be half way down the calf muscle. If it is too long, it interferes with your leg aids. If it is too short, it can catch on the top edge of your boot.

Billet straps are meant to distribute the weight and balance of the rider from front to back and side to side. Some feel that the buckles of short billets interfere with leg feel. Long billets should buckle about four inches below the saddle flap. Three strap billets are intended to give you an option of using the front and back or middle and back straps. Some horses are sensitive to the front strap use as it may bring the points of the saddle into uncomfortable contact. The points are to keep the saddle from sliding forward over the shoulder. Whichever strap is not used should be removed by releasing the stitches.

Girths should fit in the horses 'girth groove' approximately four inches behind the elbow. If a contoured girth is used, be sure the narrow sections are behind each elbow to prevent chaffing. To minimize damage to your billet straps, many girths come with rollers on the buckles.

Riding clinics, group saddle fittings, conventions with several saddle makers and distributors are excellent places to begin to develop the feel you need to fit you, the rider, with your next saddle. Talk to several fitters, particularly those who deal with your chosen discipline as they will be excellent sources of information and will help you to develop that 'feel'. Ann Forrest, of Equestrian Imports offers thirty day or longer saddle rental. As she points out, if your horse is young and still developing, or your horse is coming back from an injury and the saddle needs will be changing, or you want a trial period prior to buying a saddle, you might consider renting a saddle. Some companies have test saddles you can ride in for a week before you buy.

Saddles come from stock out of a catalog, and from a few to many custom items, all the way to a fully customized saddle. Jochen Schleese (who received his master's certification at Passier Germany) of Schleese Saddlery offers saddles custom made from a mold of your seat. "This is particularly important for clients who have had pelvic injuries, one leg slightly shorter than the other, or other issues that need to be addressed." This also allows them to "exactly form the tree to accommodate the depth of your seat bones, width of pubic bone, and note any aberrations in conformation which need to be accounted for."

When you are comfortable with your list of needs and preferences, you can begin shopping with confidence. You will know when you find someone who is truly knowledgeable and that you can trust to help guide you as you find that perfect saddle that fits both your horse and you. Those hundreds or even thousands of dollars that you spend for that saddle will bring you years of comfortable riding and enable you to enjoy your horse and your riding even more. To echo Deborah Witty, "Honest throughness in the horses body develops the musculature which develops the carrying power which develops the ability of the rider to sit the horse which makes the horse better which makes the rider better and you get that wonderful cycle."

The Treeless Saddle

The treeless saddle, called The Ansur, was developed because training issues at third level forced bareback riding and then the use of a saddle pad with stirrups on a talented and sensitive horse named Mountain View Bronze. The saddle then developed by Peter De Cosemo and Bill Huston has no bolts, nails, flocking, hinges or fiberglass, and no pressure points. It is made of six layers of different density material that molds to the horses back. The middle layer, or 'trauma layer' uses the same materials as a football players shoulder pads or a hockey players shin guards to protect the horse back. The stirrups hang directly beneath the leg, and the thigh/knee blocks are moveable so that you can position them as desired. There is more saddle in front of the rider, there are divots in the seat for the riders seat bones, and there is no gap between the seat and cantle. Because there is no tree to maintain a specific width or shape, the treeless saddle takes on the shape of the horse it is put on. The saddle fits any horse, which means you do not need a different saddle for each horse if you have more than one. The seat size is not measured in inches but comes in petite, small, and medium.

Sources

Peter De Cosemo, Ansur Saddlery, P.O. Box 170, Washougal, Wa 98671. Phone 360/835-1545

Ann Forrest, President, Equestrian Imports, 1601 Bern Creek Loop, Sarasota, Florida 34240. Phone 941/377-2768

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