

Investigating Girth Problems

When a horse objects to the saddling process, it's time to do some detective work to find the root of the problem and identify possible solutions.

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Put enough saddles on enough horses, and you're eventually going to run across one who strongly objects to the process of tacking up. Some of these "girthy" horses express their displeasure with pinned-back ears and pointed delivery of "the evil eye." Others bite, kick and even attempt to bolt in response to saddling and cinching.

This behavior might be pure mischievousness, but probably isn't. It's much more likely that the horse is giving you his honest reaction to an event he truly finds unpleasant. And punishment – a natural if unfortunate impulse – simply reinforces the notion that saddling is something to fear and fight. When addressed with a boot in the ribs or a slap on the muzzle, girthing only gets worse and can endanger you, your horse and anyone who's in the vicinity when you tack up.

Instead, you need to get to the root of the problem so that you can devise a solution. Often, this task is relatively easy: With a systematic investigation, you're likely to spot an acute injury along the girth line or an ill-fitting saddle. In other cases, you may not turn up any outward evidence of trauma, so you'll need to experiment with a variety of girths and girthing techniques, gauging your horse's reaction to each.

Finally, there are the most challenging cases, in which the cause of girthy behavior isn't a physical problem at all, but a reaction to saddling that has become an ingrained habit. With these horses, you may find that the answer is not simply a change of equipment, but rather an entirely new approach to tacking up, riding and even relating to your horse.

HOW TIGHT IS TOO TIGHT?

A girth needs to be only tight enough to provide a secure platform for riding. Cranking a girth up an extra hole just because you have the muscle power is unnecessary and risks injuring a horse's pectoral muscles. Tightening a girth while in the saddle requires less effort and is even more likely to exceed reasonable pressure. And on some oddly shaped horses you can make a girth painfully tight and still not stabilize the saddle.

To begin your investigation of girthing, you'll need to observe your horse carefully throughout the saddling process to pinpoint exactly when he begins to object. Tack up as you normally would, but be very watchful of his body language. Context is extremely important when trying to figure out the causes of girthing and will dictate how you go about resolving the problem. I have found that most girthy horses fit one of the following three descriptions.

1. Uptight During Tightening

Scenario: The horse is fine until you begin to tighten the girth.

Potential remedies: different girth, change in girth-tightening technique; treatment of a physical problem.

A horse that stands willingly when the saddle is laid on his back but reacts negatively when you begin to tighten the girth is sensitive to pressure along his girth line. He may be naturally "ticklish" and simply find the pressure unpleasant, or he may experience some level of pain due to an old or new injury in the area that the girth touches.

Such horses often act up until the rider mounts, then miraculously settle down. This is attributable to the weight of the rider, which presses the saddle down and effectively loosens the girth. These horses typically have no objection to being ridden bareback or otherwise handled.

If your horse seems to have girth-pressure issues, thoroughly examine the affected area. With the horse untacked, use your fingers to explore his sides, "armpits" and the bottom of his girth line. Use a light touch first, then deeper probing pressure – be ready to evade bites or kicks if these are your horse's preferred ways of complaining. You're looking for a "hot spot" that, when poked, invariably causes him to react. If you find a spot that reliably induces a reaction, it's probably the site of an old or ongoing trauma.

Also note any areas that have a different texture – a soft bulge may be a hematoma from a recent kick or a ridge of scar tissue may signal an old girth-related injury. If you can't find physical clues to your horse's behavior, you may be dealing with a complex physiological problem that requires the attention of a veterinarian or specialist. Don't hesitate to call in a professional if you are stumped.

If you do locate a trouble spot and it appears to be associated with obvious injury, call your veterinarian for a more in-depth examination. If you find only a minor defect or no outward sign of trouble beyond sensitivity, experiment with various girths and tacking arrangements.

First, try a different girth. Wider girths distribute the pressure over a larger area, so consider four inches wide a minimum for a girthy horse, but try the widest you can find. "Balding" girths, named for their creator, have a distinct hourglass shape that keeps the girth clear of the sensitive area behind the elbows without sacrificing width. In some specialty tack stores you may find girths that have large leather "plates" six inches or more wide at the center for maximum pressure distribution. Consider different material, too. Many horses prefer cotton string girths because the strands move and adapt to the shape irregularities all horses have. Neoprene and synthetic girths or covers are likewise soft and flexible.

Also try various girthing techniques. If you typically use the first and third billet straps, try fastening to only the back two. If you've got a saddle with full double rigging, try one that has a centerfire rigging. A slight rearward adjustment might make all the difference by placing the girth over larger muscle masses. Tighten the girth very gradually, only one hole at a time. You may even pause between pulls, rub the horse on the neck and walk him forward a step or two to ward off tension that may contribute to girth problems.

When the girth is on, pull the horse's front legs all the way forward, first one, then the other. This accomplishes two things that will contribute to girth comfort. First of all it will smooth the skin under and in front of the girth, minimizing the risk of pinching. And second, it will stretch the pectoral muscles, releasing any tension that can lead to discomfort. Mount up and walk your horse a bit – perhaps even trot him briefly – before checking your girth tension; then tighten only if necessary. When you've stopped your serious work for the day and are cooling out, loosen the girth a bit as a courtesy to your horse.

Eventually, with these modifications in your equipment and approach, you'll find that a horse who is sensitive to girth pressure, whether it's from natural ticklishness or pathology, will become less and less agitated when it comes time to cinch up. If you don't see an improvement in a week or two, continue to experiment but call your veterinarian if you suspect there is a deeper physical problem.

IN PRACTISE – 5 GOLDEN RULES FOR GIRTHING

- 1. Use only clean girth that is in good repair.*
- 2. Tighten the girth one hole at a time, or tighten a cinch gradually, giving the horse time to relax between adjustments.*
- 3. Make the girth only as tight as needed to secure the saddle; just because you can tighten a girth further doesn't mean you should.*
- 4. Pull the horse's front legs forward after girthing to smooth the skin and stretch the muscles.*
- 5. Whenever possible, loosen the girth for cooling out.*

2. Sour About The Saddle

Scenario: The horse acts up when the saddle is placed on his back.

Potential remedies: different saddle pad, re-stuffing panels of the saddle, switching to a different saddle, treatment of a physical problem.

A horse that is compliant until the weight of the saddle settles on his back is most likely reacting to that specific pressure. These horses may be "cold backed" and sink as you mount them or even buck a bit when you first move off. Horses who object to the feel of the saddle may also be anticipating discomfort they associate with the tightening of the girth. Because of that possibility, you'll need to conduct a physical investigation of the girth area as described above. If nothing obvious turns up, focus your attention on the saddle area.

Begin your detective work by running your fingers along the top of his withers and spine, first with light pressure and then more firmly. Again, you're looking for "hot spots" of sensitivity, defects in the hair or underlying tissues, obvious irregularities in the bone or any swelling. Also check the skin and muscles alongside the spine, throughout the area where the saddle rests and under the saddle flaps. Even if all looks normal, any sudden reaction by the horse, such as a groan, wince or "sinking" away from pressure, may be a sign that something is amiss.

Once you've located a trouble spot on his back, try to correlate it to one of the most likely culprits – an aspect of your pad or saddle fit. If your horse's withers are tender, for example, check the clearance of the pommel and pad over that spot. If a horse has a hot spot on either side of his spine, about halfway down the length of the saddle, you'll want to check to make sure your saddle doesn't "rock", putting intense pressure in that area.

Think creatively because the answers aren't always obvious, I've seen horses that have developed very tender flanks because of dirty, stiff saddle flaps that dig into their flesh as the rider applies leg. A quick saddle check can be done by most observant horse-people but if you feel unqualified, ask an experienced friend or barn-mate, or call in a professional saddle fitter for an assessment. In addition, your veterinarian may offer insights into the potential for deeper trouble in the back.

Fixing saddle-related problems may be as simple as switching to a different saddle pad or as involved as finding a new saddle. Keep in mind that this is a trial-and-error process, so you may end up temporarily making the problem worse, in which case backtrack and try another change. Most saddle-fit issues will resolve quickly after one or two sympathetic saddling sessions with a suitable combination of saddle and pad.

In some of the most frustrating cases, horses with apparent saddle-fit issues do not improve, despite extensive changes to their equipment. These cases typically require a professional assessment from a veterinarian to rule out other, non-saddle-related pathology.

A horse may have rolled on a rock, for instance, or cracked his withers when he fell backward while rearing or have some other type of injury unrelated to being ridden. A surprisingly common source of this type of injury is pressure or rubs from an ill-fitting blanket.

The trauma done to the withers in these horses can make them frantic when anything or anyone touches their withers, and a change in saddles will make no difference. Again, you need to think creatively and be persistent in order to help your horse.

EASY DOES IT

When investigating a suspected girth problem, take a critical look at how you actually place the saddle on your horse. If you tend to toss it up on his back in haste, you might be making the problem worse. Lift the saddle in the correct position over the back and set it down gently – it's a good habit to adopt when dealing with any horse, not just the sensitive ones.

3. Mind Over Matter

Scenario: The horse gets agitated at the mere sight of the saddle and girth, even before it is placed on his back.

Potential remedies: tack up in a different location, change handling technique, revisit training basics, adjust work regimen.

Horses who act up as the saddle is carried toward them are the toughest cases to solve because so many factors may be at work. It is possible that the horse is anticipating pressure from the girth or saddle, which means you'll have to follow the steps for investigating those possibilities, which can take weeks. If you rule out pain from the saddle and girth, you're faced with an even more challenging case: a horse that objects to the entire process of saddling.

This means you'll need to continue and even expand your detective work until you discover those details of the saddling process that bother your horse the most.

Even small changes may make a difference. For instance, if you always tack up in the cross ties, try putting the saddle on your horse in his stall. The simple change of location might be enough to overcome his association. Likewise, you might want to try tacking up in a different order, saddling your horse before bridling him or vice versa to see if that helps.

Again, think creatively. Your horse can't tell you what specifically annoys him and you'd be surprised to find out what some horses object to. We once owned a horse who was perfectly content to stand for saddling if it was done from his left side. Attempt to do it from his right – or even have someone standing on that side – and he would cow-kick with alarming force and accuracy. It took weeks of experimenting for us to figure this out, and we never did discern why he had this foible.

Were we accommodating a "bad" behavior? Perhaps, but such accommodation is often necessary when the return is a safe, happy, useful animal. It seems a reasonable trade-off to me.

CONFORMATION - The shape of girth woes

A horse's conformation can make him more susceptible to girthing. In particular, two specific equine body types are especially prone to girth problems, either as a direct result of the conformation itself or because of the misguided efforts of people to compensate for it.

Potbellied horses. *Some horses and ponies have large, pendulous bellies that tend to push any girth forward, particularly during strenuous or fast work. As the girth slides forward, it can press on more sensitive areas of the pectoral muscles or painfully pinch the skin behind the elbows.*

Certain types of girths are less likely to slip forward - cotton string girth, for instance "grab" somewhat better than slick leather models – but a more surefire fix is a crupper to keep the saddle and, therefore, the girth in proper place.

Upside-down-pear-shaped horses. *These horses have a wide upper body and low withers, combined with a narrow pectoral region. If you could view a "slice" of the horse's barrel at the girth line, it would resemble an upside-down pear. In horses with this type of conformation, a girth may not make contact with the entire belly, which makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to tighten the girth enough to stabilize the saddle.*

What's more, if an overzealous rider is determined to do so, he can over-tighten the girth to the point of pain or injury. Using a breastplate and crupper on such horses can help to stabilize the saddle and prevent dangerous over-tightening.

If you can't isolate a specific aspect of saddling that sets a horse off, you can try to make entirely new associations with the process. This is essential retraining the horse to accept tack, starting from square one. Spend time grooming him, focusing on itchy spots he likes to have scratched. A treat or two to set the mood is also a good idea. When it's time to saddle the horse, allow him to sniff the blanket and perhaps rub his shoulders, sides and flank before carefully placing it on his back. If he objects, stop and return to an activity he is more comfortable with. Once you can place the saddle pad on without reaction, follow the same routine with the saddle, allowing him to sniff it and very, very gently placing it on his

back. Reward desired behaviors with a rub on the neck or treats and ignore the unwanted behaviors, taking them as a sign that you've rushed things. After several such sessions with the pad and saddle, you can move on to adding the girth.

There is always the possibility that the horse reacts to saddling because of what follows. Consider whether the horse is overworked or might be simply bored by repetitious under-saddle work. If this may be the case, rethink your riding and training goals. A month long hiatus from ring work might change his outlook: If other aspects of his working life improve, a horse may suddenly and permanently lose his tendency toward girthing.

Anyone who has ever had a girthy horse knows how frustrating it can be. The solution to a girth problem may be as minor as a tack change or as significant as a completely new approach to training.

As with solving practically any equine behavior or training problem, finding the remedy for girth-related issues requires that you devote the time and energy necessary to identify the root cause. This isn't quick or easy work, but consider it a long-term investment in your horse's comfort and happiness.

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