

Catherine H. of Kelowna, BC:

I know I should regularly oil my saddle. Can I use baby oil or a vegetable oil if I have nothing else available to add moisture to my leather?

Answer:

It's highly recommended that you use only oil that is manufactured for use on leather - use baby oil on babies and olive oil in salads, because that's where they belong. If you use any type of soap (glycerine or otherwise) make sure you rinse it off completely. Soap will eventually eat through the leather just as sweat will, so you're better off just using water if you have nothing else. Get rid of the sweat in any case. (Think of washing your hands - even with glycerin soap. You do rinse it off completely and then apply a hand lotion). Beeswax cream for saddles works very well as a moisturizing conditioner. It's also recommended to use oil very sparingly on your saddle and tack, and only on those parts of the saddle that don't touch you. In some English saddles, excessive use of oil on the seat will actually soak through the laminated layers of the beechwood trees and loosen the glue to the extent that your tree may be compromised to the point of breakage.

Kris V. of Kitchener, ON.

Why do I have problems in most dressage saddles with my leg shooting forward?

Traditionally English dressage saddles have been built for men. Men are narrow in the seat bones, and wide in the crotch area. Women are built exactly oppositely – wide in the seat bones, and narrow through the crotch. In dressage you want to achieve your classic shoulders-hips-heels straight line, but as a woman it hurts to sit on your pubic bone. So you collapse at the hip to escape the pain, your leg shoots forward, and you are fighting your position rather than using your saddle to help your position. Many more saddle makers are clueing into this fact – that's why Schleese has developed its 'crotch comfort' saddle tree! (and men like the air pocket in 'that' area too!)

Leonard W., Albuquerque, NM

Do gaited horses/mules require a specific type of saddle?

These are equines like any other and as such should have a saddle that fits you as the rider, fits their conformation, and of course, is appropriate to whatever discipline you use them for.

Sandra T., Vancouver, BC

I have a young horse and she is starting to wear her saddle, but I have noticed it sliding forward, on to her shoulders. What would be the best solution? I currently use a Bates (Cair), so I don't think refitting is an option.

Your young horse is probably growing and changing conformation, which is why your saddle is slipping forward. As it muscles up, the trapezius becomes more pronounced (and wider over the withers), whereas the longissimus dorsi will become more elongated, which sometimes is mistaken for atrophy at the shoulder - but the result is that the saddle will slip forward. The best thing is of course to have the saddle tree adjusted to conform to this change, but I'm not sure that the Bates will allow very much adjustment at the tree. Changing the padding (and in your case, the air) will not really do much - as a temporary expedient you will probably need to use a crupper to hold the saddle in place, but your horse will certainly be uncomfortable very quickly.

Helen F., Birmingham AL

What is the best saddle rack to use when I am storing my saddle daily?

The best kind of saddle rack is one that is the same length of the gullet, it can be either free-standing or wall mounted. The panels of the saddle should not be touching the saddle rack to maintain the form of the wool/air. When you are riding your horse the panels heat up from the horse's back. The warmed leather and wool could actually change shape to the shape of the rack if not allowed to cool before storing. The best materials for a saddle rack are materials that do not retain moisture because you do not want the leather to be damp while being stored as this can cause mould. Saddle racks should not have anything that protrudes into the gullet causing scuffing of the leather. Overall, the saddle rack should not interfere with the panels or the gullet, it should support the saddle from pommel to cantle. It is also a good idea to use a saddle cover to keep out excess dirt and moisture while the saddle is not in use.

Samantha S., Newmarket ON

What does Saddlefit 4 Life mean?

Saddlefit 4 Life refers to the fact that when you buy a Schleese saddle for a particular horse, this saddle can be adjusted and adapted to fit for the life of *this* horse. Of course, if your next horse is similar in conformation and size, the saddle will likely work for it as well with only minor adjustments necessary. If you take good care of your saddle, it is an investment that will last you a long time (15-20 years), however, the Saddlefit 4 Life guarantee refers only to the original horse for which the saddle was made. It shouldn't be taken literally to mean that the saddle will work for *the rider* as long as they live!

Angela D., Wetaskiwin, AB:

I have a friend who has a wool flocked Schleese saddle - and thinks the flocking makes the panels too hard and that it hurts her horse's back. I have a Jes Elite with air and wonder if you could inform me of the benefits and downfalls of having a saddle with wool flocking compared to air? Can you replace the wool flocked panels with air?

There is a real division between air and wool fans. Both panel fillings have their pros and cons, but before I go into these, I would like to inform your friend that if the stuffing is too hard, as she feels, it may be time to change the stuffing. A lot depends on how old the saddle is and when it was last reflocked - and with time, yes, the wool/synthetic mix may become a bit hard which indicates a whole new stuffing is required. If she could give us the serial number, we could look up the history of the saddle and the work done. Air is not always the answer for every horse, although it is not a big deal to change wool to air. Because air allows the movement of the horse to translate through that much better, many riders are finding it 'too bouncy' and are actually converting back from air to wool. It was really popular in the late 1990's, but in the meantime many of our former air clients have changed back to wool; finding it only a temporary expedient to certain problems they may have experienced. It's the same thing with treeless saddles - they work for a while because they're 'different', but after a while the old tried and true tree, wool-stuffed saddles seem to always win out.

It's really a matter of personal preference - in whatever saddle and whatever flocking you choose! Although you find it works for you in your JES Elite, it may not work for your friend.

Kathryn B. , CA

I own a 5-year-old thoroughbred gelding who has high withers, a long back, and looks a little swaybacked. I also own a Schleese Pouvoir saddle (with flair) that was fitted to him 3 months ago. Before the saddle was fitted, he stumbled a lot with his rear legs, but only at the trot. At the canter he's fine. The stumbling got better once the saddle was fitted, but since then he has filled out a lot and has started stumbling again. Also, he flinches when I run my fingers along the right side of his back. I think the saddle is now tilted backward and needs to be widened. However, this will not give much room for clearance given his high withers. Is it difficult to get a perfect fit for a horse with the conformation I described? Also, given the age of my horse, how often should the saddle be adjusted?

At 5 years old, your horse is in a growing phase. He will likely go through another phase at 7, and another at 9. It's actually a positive sign that the saddle is no longer fitting him; he is obviously muscling up and changing as he matures (as he should). Ideally, a high-withered horse would be most comfortable in a cutback, or 1/4 cutback tree, which the tree on your Pouvoir is.

Without having seen your horse, and just to generically answer your question, his symptoms do seem to indicate that the tree may be too narrow (as he muscles up at the withers) and your saddle may need to be refilled with air (as you have the Flair system) to bring it up a little more in back. It is not really difficult to get a perfect fit for a horse (of any conformation) if you have a tree that is truly adjustable and adaptable to the horse as he changes. Your Pouvoir has an adjustable German gullet plate which can be easily widened or narrowed as needed, the gullet chamber is wide enough to accommodate the spinal processes and dorsal ligament system, and the Flair system is adaptable to the horse's back as he grows. Your horse has the paradox of narrow wide withers - a phenomenon that is easily illustrated if you hold your hands together (palms facing) like this \wedge . Keeping the angle, simply move your hands apart another inch or two - the angle is still narrow, yet the space is wide.

We generally recommend that you have your saddle fit evaluated at least once every 12-18 months, however, in the growth phases you may find it necessary to have it refit every 6-8 months. TB's have a tendency to be sensitive or "touchy" sometimes and we recommend that you run your hands down the horse's back a couple times to ensure the response is consistent. This is a more likely indicator discomfort is present.

Younger horses tend to be a little unbalanced (though also at the canter). It is possible that the fact the saddle is tilted back, therefore changing where the weight of the rider goes is affecting his balance. He may be weaker in this area and therefore sensitive as well. All the more reason to keep saddlefit maintained, especially for developing youngsters in training.

Pat C., Baltimore MD

I have a 6 year old spanish norman, who started dressage training 18 months ago with a Custom saddle. He no longer moves freely in his shoulders, except in a straight line, and will not bend willingly in that saddle. In 18 months he has changed shape so much that the saddle cannot be adjusted to fit. Defined withers and a prominent shoulder muscle with a significant pocket behind has replaced flabby and round. The saddle fitter suggested a "frog-mouth" or "flared" tree, and an extra wide gullet channel, to accommodate the big shoulder. What is a flared tree, what saddles have that, will that be sufficient to accommodate his shoulder, and what other options should I consider?

What is meant by a flared tree is actually a tree with rear-facing treepoints to accommodate growth and movement at the shoulder. Our patented *AdapTree*® is fully flexible to work with the horse's movement. Important also is an adjustable "German" gullet plate which can be widened as the horse grows. (from \wedge to this \wedge rather than from this \wedge to this ∇ !) the tree remains narrow wide rather than just being widened - do you understand the subtlety I'm trying to illustrate? Our saddles also have very wide gullet channels so as not to interfere with either the spinal processes or the dorsal ligament system. Your horse is young and will continue to muscle up and change conformation as he grows. It is important to have a saddle that will change with him.

Bev B., Warner, AB

Can there be too much space between the horse's wither and the front of the saddle? -I'm meaning where you check for wither clearance. I'm feeling way too far from my horse.

How much is "too much"? Are you talking 5"(too much) or 3" (still okay). What is important is actually that there is room all around the front of the pommel, to allow the withers muscle to 'pump up' as the horse engages. Our trees guarantee the freedom of movement at the shoulder because of the way they're made.

I know people still use the 2-3 fingers as a guideline, but this may not actually be enough, especially since this will decrease by a lot once the rider gets on the saddle. And even if there's 2-3 fingers at the top, the saddle may actually pinch along the sides of the withers (known as the 'vice' grip - where the stallion actually bites the mare to immobilize her during mounting!)

Deb, Ottawa ON

4 years ago I broke a vertebra in my back (L1). I am back riding again, and would like to continue in dressage, but I am finding I can't do sitting trot anymore. It doesn't hurt when I do it, but it hurts a lot the next day. I have a Cashel tush cushion, and I tried a lambskin saddlepad. I am riding in a Prestige Dressage 2000 saddle that I bought in 2000. Is there any type of saddle or shock absorbing material you could recommend? Seems to me there should be a saddle with a shock-absorbing seat or something, I'm sure many other people have back problems and find sitting trot next to impossible

Your injury is exactly the reason why we developed our full custom saddle to accommodate riders who have experienced some sort of pelvic or lower back injury. The process involves taking a 'butt cast' in plaster of your nether regions to determine exactly what conformational 'oddities' need to be considered when making the saddle tree.

Our saddle tree is made of patented, flexible synthetic and incorporates a 'crotch comfort' air pocket to allow you as the rider to sit perfectly straight (especially important in dressage where you want to reach the 'shoulders-hips-heels- straight line!)

Although we generally steer people away from a full-custom saddle as being relatively unnecessary, in cases such as yours we have found that it may be the only or at the very least the optimum solution.

Carolyn T., Lebanon, OR

What is the main difference between the Elite and the link dressage saddle. Also, how many cm represents a med wide tree? How do I judge the flap length that I need? I am about 5'5

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The Link has an outside thigh roll on a mono-flap and a very deep seat. It has more of a centre balance than the Elite, which has a more forward balance. In the Elite the thigh rolls are on the inside flap (there are two) and your seat is flatter. There is also a price difference of about \$1000 new. You can read more about the benefits and features of each saddle on the website.

Your flap length is determined by your upper leg length and how long you like to have your leathers when you ride. All of our fully adjustable patented *AdapTrees*® can be made to fit any horse from narrow to wide, but the general cm measure for a med-wide tree is around 30 cm at the gullet plate at the front.

Christine C., Lexington, VA

I am trying to find a saddle with a twist that fits me. Every saddle gives me pain on the inside of my right upper thigh. I don't know if it's me twisting my right leg, or the saddles I am trying are all wide or med twist. No one seems to know what twist the saddles they are selling have. Some say a med to wide, and can you can tell just by looking at the saddle what the twist is? I had a Smith-Worthington wide gullet Mystic dressage and it has a wide twist in it; this I rode for a few months and that is when the pain started. I was always lifting my rt leg off the saddle as if there was something under bothering it. And then the pain the next day. Any input would be of help.

It is a long-discussed topic - difference between waist and twist, male/female saddles, etc. Here is an excerpt from an article on our website that may give you a wee bit more insight into the question:

Especially in dressage, it is difficult for women to achieve the classic "shoulders-hips-heels" straight line, due to the fact that the articulation of female hips are different than a man's. It is painful to sit on the pubic bone, and as a result, most women collapse at the hip to escape the pain. The leg shoots forward, and time is spent fighting the position instead of concentrating on riding.

Position and balance of the rider are the key ingredients in all riding disciplines; in dressage more so than in other disciplines, because the majority of time is spent sitting. The seat bones are the key structure for the foundation of position and balance.

For men, this does not the obstacle it does for the majority of women. Men have two "V" shaped seat bones set close together, giving them a bipod axis. Although the saddle manufacturer may require special attention to that skeletal structure, it is not as complex as the woman's requirements.

Women have a broad range of hip shapes, all of which need to be accommodated when constructing a saddle. Unlike the “V” shaped man’s seat bones, women’s are usually flat. In addition, women have a more prominent pubic bone. This combination of three skeletal structures 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 interferes with the pubic bone, and unless the abdominal muscles are used, it is almost impossible to sit correctly in a saddle.

The Female Pelvis

The more inwardly the spine of a woman is curved, the more tipped forward her pelvis is going to be. This ‘hyper’-extension of the lower back is a perfectly normal trait – and in gymnastics the epitome of hyperextension is illustrated. However, the most important thing here is that the position of the back dictates how the stomach and back muscles need to work to complement each other.

The interactions of these muscles make it possible to comfortably walk, run, or even stand. If either of these muscle formations is stronger than the other, the effects will be felt in the spinal column. This can range from a backache to nerve damage. It just makes sense then, that if the position of the frame is muscled a particular way to accomplish any other athletic endeavor, then it has to be in that same position when you are riding a horse. Simply put, ride the way you are muscled. If that means you have an extremely hyper extended lower back, then ride that way. Excelling in your discipline is going to be hard enough without having to worry about the position you are forced to sit in - don’t adapt to the saddle, have the saddle made to accommodate your personal physiology.

Basically then, what we're saying is that you cannot tell the width of the twist normally by looking at a saddle - only by the feel. You should be able to sit comfortably with your legs hanging in the proper position without having to shift around too much in the seat. The seaming on the top of the saddle (from a top view) can be manipulated to make a saddle seem to have a wide or narrow twist - we always say, we buy with the eye (narrow looks nicer but may in fact be hiding a wide twist) and ride with the feel (which is a totally personal thing). But logic dictates that *most* men will be more comfortable with a wide twist and *most* women with a narrow twist, given the inherent physiology of our pelvises.

Nancy B., Ann Arbor MI

In some cases you might make a special tree with more surface area, say for the short-backed horse. Otherwise you'd likely be looking at kids' saddles, which would be short but not suitable for an adult. It sounds like in a lot of cases the gullet of the stock tree can be adjusted for a range of withers. Correct me if I'm wrong on any of this.

It's really interesting how the length of the back doesn't determine the saddle fit area. My 16-1h mare is long-backed but her saddle area is short and that's why my 17.5" saddle with a cantle panel that turns downward has been an issue. Fortunately a 17" Link with the turned up design at the cantle seems promising. I love the way that saddle feels. I know the Wave is very popular, but the 17" pins me in too much; whereas the 17" Link feels great.

The trees are essentially fairly straight and flat to reflect the conformation of the area of the back where they should be placed. All other conformational issues are remedied by either adjusting the stuffing (whatever type it is) or making the necessary adjustments to the bare tree (if these requirements reflect an extreme displacement of 'normality'). If there is bridging in a saddle, it is generally not because the tree doesn't fit, it's because the flocking has shifted somehow. If it is done correctly (by taking the saddle apart) rather than just adding by 'poking' in additional stuffing, the bridging problem should be solved and not return - and if it does there is another problem which needs to be addressed in the refit of the saddle (I can't say specifically what that might be at this point, this is just symptomatic of something that needs to be researched more closely by the saddlemaker!)

Amanda, Lethbridge, AB

I am wondering what your opinion is regarding sheepskin half pads. They seem to be increasing in popularity - do they actually make a saddle more comfortable for a horse? Do they absorb impact on the horse's back on the landing of a jump? I'm just curious about the benefits or downfalls of using one with my Schleese saddle.

If your saddle has been fitted correctly, you shouldn't need more than a thin cotton pad which protects the panels from the horse's sweat. Other pads (any other pads) may be used as temporary expedients for poorly fitting saddles, however, with a sheepskin pad (especially under a jumping saddle) you are definitely moving away from the "close contact" feel you want from your saddle. The most comfortable saddle for your horse is one that has been fitted properly - and if it fits properly, the idea is that it can be ridden without a pad of any sort (except, as I said, protection from sweat). The shock absorbing properties of a sheepskin pad are minimal - the best shock absorber in a jumping saddle is the Flair panel, to tell the truth! (which has been shown to allow recovery over a jump after one stride vs. 7 with a felt/foam panel - which ours don't).

Townes W., Hickory, NC

I have a 3-year old draft (Percheron) cross mare that I have started under saddle. The problem is the saddle fit. She has outgrown everything I have. Using the Wintec-easy-change gullet system, she measures past the extra-wide range. The trees on the saddles I have are just too narrow. I have heard they have a draft-size gullet system, but I would prefer leather. Is there anything besides a Wintec that will fit her? I plan to ride her in a dressage as well as hunt-seat saddle.

The best bet for your hard to fit and wide withered Percheron would definitely be a saddle with an extremely adjustable gullet plate. The problem with the self-adjusting gullet plates is that they cannot be adjusted to properly accommodate a truly wide withers area - they will be adjusted in teepee fashion by remaining narrow over the top of the withers and just getting wider and wider over the ends. Our gullet plates, on the other hand, can be widened in the shape of an upside down U rather than an upside down V.

That is why we consider our saddles 'non-disposable' and maintain that they can be adjusted over the life of the horse. Your horse is still very young at 3 and you will likely need to invest in several saddles if you continue to go the Wintec route. Or you could make a serious investment in an adjustable saddle, but keep it over the life of your horse.

Claudia Z., Vancouver BC

One of my clients has bought a high quality dressage saddle with air panels, has had it fit to the horse by a saddle maker. Now this horse develops a few edema bumps on top of the spine about in the middle of the saddle after each ride. They disappear after a few hours and suggest the saddle is not fitting properly. The saddle maker has re-checked the fit and says it fits correctly as well as commented that we should use anti-slip, anti-friction pads. The edemas continue to appear even with those pads. What would you suggest we do?

The problem here seems to be too much movement so that the skin gets moved back and forth over the spinal processes. This irritates the skin and may actually cause 'shearing' of the top of the seven layers of skin. Small water bumps may show up, and while in the beginning they will disappear after couple of minutes, it is important that the movement of the saddle be stopped.

I would check the following:

- Girth could be a problem ; length, style, shape, or material
- Too much air in the panels
- tree too narrow
- the horse not may not be suited for an air saddle. The horse could have a lot of body fluid inherently; it could also be a really big mover and be hard to sit in the first place.
- And finally, the saddle style could be wrong for the horse - it could be too long, the panels could be too wide, and the seat balance might not be in alignment with the horse's center of gravity.

Most of the time if you check these 5 items you will solve the problem. However now that the skin is already irritated, you need to give the skin 4-5 weeks to heal (which means time off, and no saddle!)

Nancy B., Ann Arbor MI

I'm really confused about gullet dimensions. All trees come with a width spec.: narrow, med, wide... What determines these dimensions on a Schleese? Is there a standard gullet that is shaped to the appropriate width or is the hardware for the different widths different to begin with? What year did you start making the Link? What year did the design change to open up the channel on the Link? I say channel and not gullet because I'm confused about the terminology.

If my horse needs a wide channel along the back and a med to narrow width at the withers, does she take a med/narrow, or a wide gullet? That actually brings me to the same question about the tree. Would the plastic part of the tree be the same dimensions for all models of the Link, leaving the adjustability in the metal gullet around the withers?

The Link was designed and put on the market in 2002. It is an enduring design, which has been since copied by nearly every other saddlemaker - the monoflap and the large outer thigh roll. We use a standard gullet plate which is modified in its width to accommodate a specific horse's measurement, and can be adjusted with our *SaddleSizer*[™] (tree machine) over the course of the horse's life as he matures and changes musculature (or for any subsequent horse, since the saddle is also made for the rider). The channel width has nothing really to do with the width at the gullet over the withers; it should be uniformly 3-4 fingers wide regardless whether the horse is considered narrow at the gullet (pommel of the saddle) or not. You don't want to interfere with the spinal processes or the supraspinous ligament system along the horse's back. The tree itself is sized as well according to the horse's requirements - and sometimes you need a larger seat for a shorter-backed horse which is also accounted for when the tree is chosen. Basically what I am saying is that there are lots of variables which are taken into account when your saddle is being made

Jane P., Williams Lake BC

What is the difference between a forward balanced saddle and a saddle balanced further back on the horse's back. Is forward better or does it depend on the rider, the horse, or other factors?

The balance depends on all of these factors, which I'll address one by one. The short answer is "it depends".

First of all - your preference and comfort as a rider can determine the balance. Where do you like to sit? Some women (especially) find it painful to sit directly on their pubic bones (because of the traditionally 'male' saddle they're riding in) and therefore collapse at the hip to escape the pain, to sit more on their seat bones. This may result in the 'chair seat', with your leg shooting forward - you fight the saddle constantly for correct position rather than using it to help you ride better.

Next determining factor is what discipline you're riding in - most dressage riders prefer the centre or rear balance saddles, whereas the h/j riders prefer front or centre balance. Third of all - your horse's conformation (especially back length and weight-bearing support area over the rib cage) determines somewhat what balance works best - the short backed horses generally move better if the saddle has a front or centre balance, since if the rider sits too far back you can actually hurt the horse since the weight is carried too far back.

The “sweet spot” of the saddle can be either in the front, the centre, or the rear. This is achieved by shaping the top of the tree in accordance to the style of the saddle or the conformation of the rider. The bottom of the tree and the panel is designed to fit the individual horse’s back. No matter what saddle you ride, every effort should be made to distribute your weight over the horse’s back in three sections in a ratio of 30:40:30. While of paramount importance to most riders is the comfort of their horse, not enough attention is paid to the comfort of the rider – it is in fact much more crucial to ensure the saddle fits the rider and is comfortable, or I guarantee you that your horse will never be comfortable, no matter how good the saddle fits him. You as the rider will constantly be fighting the saddle, which will translate down to the horse and impede his comfort and ability to move. Never compromise the fit to the horse (using pads or whatever) in order to create a more comfortable fit to the rider. There are 15 points on a saddle which are geared towards fitting the rider – none of which have anything to do with fitting the horse – and seat balance is only one of them!

While the tendency towards a forward seat balance is presently very popular, this is in exact opposition to the tendency back in 1986, when we first arrived from Germany, when the popular saddles were mostly rear balance. Today, with increasing technology allowing better insight into the horse’s back and musculature, every effort is being made to reduce or eliminate the weight off the horse’s rear back. This however backfires when the rider sits in the wrong seat balance (or one or the other of the 15 points are off) for him. The rider will subconsciously protect himself and push his back into the saddle, thereby increasing the pressure by twice as much to the horse’s back. The rider becomes stiff, uncomfortable and rigid, and will impede the horse accordingly. A saddle I recommend for the individual rider is one which fits the rider at all 15 points. It can then be easily adjusted to fit the second individual in the equation – the horse, so that all three components – horse, rider, and saddle melt into one unit. Saddle fit is actually three components – fitting the rider, fitting the horse, and then the third component will result, which is harmony. Harmony cannot be achieved if only one component works.