Common Sense Saddle Fitting

CIRCLE Y OF YOAKUM

AMERICA'S LEADING SADDLE BRAND

Determining saddle fit is important to the comfort and safety of horse and rider. There are many things that affect the fit of the saddle. Here we outline the major points and how to avoid the common mistakes of saddle fitting. Use the check boxes to note items that apply to you.

Fit for the Horse

The goal in saddle fitting is to have the greatest amount of contact between the bar of the tree and the horse. Keep in mind there is no standardization in the industry for tree sizing-measurements differ between tree makers, saddle makers, and saddle styles.

Withers

- ☐ The average, defined wither will usually fit a Medium/Regular tree. This horse will have a more refined body with definition in the withers-the modern version of Quarter Horses, Tennessee Walking Horses, Thoroughbreds, etc.
- ☐ A more rounded, mutton wither with a flatter back will usually fit a Wide tree. This horse has a blocky build, heavier neck, often referred to as the "foundation" type.
- ☐ Draft horses and Draft horse crosses with a very wide, flat back and wither, will usually require a Draft or Extra Wide tree.
- ☐ A very prominent, narrow wither may indicate the lack of muscle behind the shoulder blade, and the need for a shoulder bridge pad. The shoulder bridge pad fills in this "hollow" area, allowing the saddle bars to make better contact with the horse.
- ☐ Large muscles behind the scapula can interfere with saddle fit. A wider tree may be needed. Flex trees also work well with this conformation.

Horse with defined wither and usually fits a medium, regular, or semi-Quarter horse tree.

Foundation type horse with rounded withers that typically needs a Wide or Full Quarter horse tree.

Topline

- ☐ A level topline, wither and croup being about the same height, is ideal.
- ☐ Higher haunches, or the horse built "downhill", can allow the saddle to put more pressure on the withers and may require a pad that is built up in the wither area.
- ☐ A swayback causes "bridging" of the saddle. The bars only make contact in the front and rear of the saddle, putting excess pressure or rubbing the withers and loins. It can be seen in older horses, and poorly conditioned horses, and is a common saddle fitting problem. It can be remedied with the use of a bridge pad.
- ☐ A horse with a short back will require a saddle with short bars/ skirts.

This 20-year-old gelding has a significant sway back and prominent withers. Remedied with a shoulder bridge pad. Note the white spots from past ill-fitting saddle.

Fit for the Horse

Typical Mule back which requires a Mule tree because of the straighter bars.

Topline

- A very straight back, often seen in mules but not very prevalent in horses, can cause the saddle to "rock". Rocking is a condition where the tree puts more pressure on the center of the horses back, and less at the ends of the bars. A tree with a "mule bar" or a pad with shims may be recommended.

Condition & Age

- Consider the body condition of the horse you are fitting. A significant amount of weight gain or loss can alter the way the saddle fits.
- Also consider the age and maturity of the horse. A saddle you buy for your two-year old today may not fit as well when he fills out in another year or two. As a mature horse progresses into its senior years, changes in conformation can alter the fit of your existing saddle.

Fit for the Rider

Discipline

- How will the saddle be used? Do you plan to rope, trail ride, barrel race, etc.? For example, a roping saddle needs to be built strong enough to withstand tremendous torque, but if you are trail riding, lightweight comfort will be more important.
- Specialized saddles are available for certain types of horses. For example, gaited saddles allow more bar flare for the horse's shoulder action; mule saddles typically have a straighter bar for the mule back.

Sizing for the Rider

- Rider preference for saddle size varies-some like a larger seat, some a smaller seat, and discipline plays a role. In general, you should have 4" between the front of your body and the swell of the saddle. Your backside should rest at the base of the cantle, but not be pressing against the back of the cantle.
- A slightly larger seat is better than too small. When sitting in the saddle your thighs should not touch the back of the swell. This can be uncomfortable for the rider.
- If you have long legs you may need a larger seat size so your knees (long thighs) don't hang off the front of the fenders.
- When buying a saddle always adjust the stirrups to the proper length so you can assess the feel of the seat and the balance of the saddle correctly.

Evaluate the Saddle on the Horse

With the saddle positioned correctly-the bars of the tree behind the shoulder blades of the horse-evaluate the following points:

Gullet Clearance

- Place the saddle on the horse's bare back (no pad). There should be two to three fingers space between the top of the wither and the gullet of the saddle.
- If you can fit your whole hand (vertically) between the bottom of the gullet and the wither, the tree is probably too narrow.
- If there is room for only one finger, or the bottom of the gullet is touching the top of the wither, the tree is probably too wide.

Good gullet clearance

Evaluate the Saddle on the Horse

With the saddle positioned correctly-the bars of the tree behind the shoulder blades of the horse-evaluate the following points:

Great saddle fit-the saddle is level and there is adequate gullet clearance.

Levelness of Saddle

- Step back and look at the saddle on the horse's back. The saddle should be level. If the saddle is not level, you can try adjusting it by using shims, sliding it forward or back to raise or lower the front, or trying different rigging positions. When all else fails, you may need a different saddle with a better fit.
- If the front of the saddle is high the tree may be too narrow.
- If the front of the saddle is low, the tree may be too wide.

LEFT: Saddle is too narrow and perched up on this horse's withers. Pinching would occur.

RIGHT: Saddle is too wide with gullet resting on horse's withers and tilted downward.

Improper saddle fit prevents the rider's weight from being distributed evenly through the bars of the saddle tree, resulting in pressure points, rub marks, soreness, or the development of white spots. Your horse's attitude under saddle can clue you in to a problem, but keep in mind that many a good horse will endure an ill fitting saddle until the damage becomes unbearable before complaining. So be proactive in evaluating good saddle fit for your horse.

Sweat Patterns

- Sweat patterns can give an indication of how the saddle fits. Ideally, the sweat pattern will be even, without dry areas that indicate pressure points, areas where the hair has been rubbed off, ruffled hair or swirl marks than indicate excessive movement.
- Keep in mind that damage from past saddle fit issues can cause areas of dry spots or white marks
- Is most of the wear in the middle, and none on the ends? The saddle may be rocking-excessive rocking can be corrected with pads or shims.

Dry spots in center of back indicate bridging.

- Pictured right is an example of sweat patterns from a bridging saddle. The saddle bars put pressure at the front and rear only and not down the middle creating pressure points against the horse. This can lead to serious damage and soreness. A bridge pad is needed to bridge the gap between the horse's back and tree bars and to effectively distribute the rider's weight.

Saddle Pads

- You can tell by the hair, dirt, or wear marks where the most pressure is on the horse.
- Is most of the wear in the middle, and none on the ends? The saddle may be rocking-excessive rocking can be corrected with pads or shims.
- Is the middle of the pad under the bar not as dirty or compressed as the ends? That could be an indication of bridging. If you think there is even a chance there is any bridging (pressure at the front and back of the bars) it is best to correct with a shim or bridge pad in the center of the bars to correct the problem.

Avoid Common Mistakes of Saddle Fitting

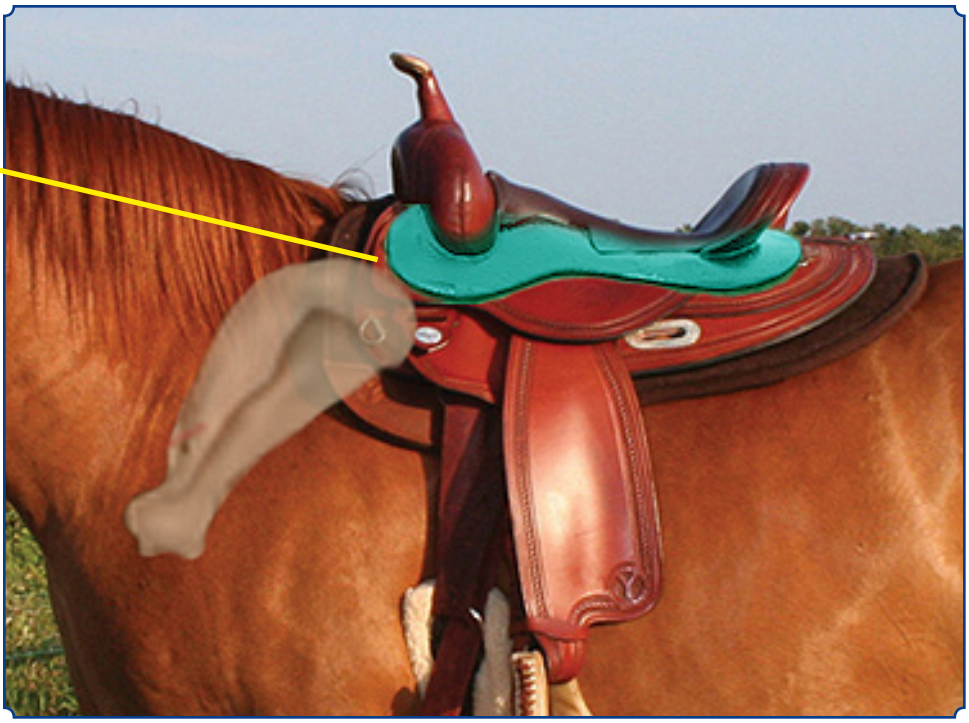
Saddle Placement

- The front of the bar of the saddle tree (approximately the front edge of the concho) should be behind the shoulder blade (scapula) to allow for freedom of movement.
- Placing the saddle too far forward over the scapula can cause unnecessary rubbing and pressure (white spots). The blanket or pad and the skirt of the saddle can cover the back of the scapula but the bars of the tree must be behind the shoulder blade.

Front Cinch Usage

- Do not over tighten the cinch. The tighter you cinch the more pressure YOU create before you even sit in the saddle. The front cinch should be about as tight as your belt-if it's comfortable for you it should be comfortable for your horse.
- Do not over tighten the cinch to compensate for a saddle that rolls. Check that the saddle is the correct fit for the horse. Try a different saddle pad (make sure you aren't over-padding), a wider cinch, neoprene cinch, or flank cinch to help secure the saddle.

Bars of the tree should settle behind the horse's scapula. This is important as a saddle will travel back/forward to settle into this sweet spot.



Proper saddle placement

Your horse is one of the best indicators of good fit, so be aware of changes in your horse's attitude or performance.

Avoid Common Mistakes of Saddle Fitting

Flank Cinch Usage

- Most people use the flank (rear) cinch incorrectly. The flank cinch provides stability to the saddle and should be snug (not tight) against the horse. A rule of thumb is to be able to slip two fingers between the flank and the horse at the apex of the belly. It should not be loose or hang below the horse's belly-a loose flank cinch is a danger to horse and rider. Always use the connecting strap between the front and rear cinches to position the flank cinch properly and prevent it from becoming a "bucking strap".
- If the back of your saddle is moving side to side or up and down at the walk, trot, or canter, the movement can cause a scrubbing action, irritating the skin (white spots). Use a flank cinch.

Pads and Padding

- Don't over pad your horse; the more pads you use the wider it makes your horse and the higher your saddle will sit on the horse's back (saddle will roll easier, more leverage being higher). Excess padding will not allow you to feel the horse's movement as well.
- If you are riding for extended periods of time, you need a pad that will absorb sweat and dissipate heat. Natural fiber pads and blankets are more breathable and comfortable for your horse. Wool is a great example for its natural moisture wicking and shock absorbing properties. Don't use a neoprene pad on a long trail ride-it doesn't breathe or absorb moisture, and white spots, rubbing and pulling of the hair follicles can occur. Neoprene is a shock absorbing material and is great for performance horses that will not have a pad on all day.

Cleanliness

- Keep your horse's back clean-dirt is abrasive. The movement of the horse and the rider creates movement of the saddle. The abrasiveness and movement causes skin irritation. Your horse's back should be cleaned, brushed, vacuumed or washed before and after riding to remove sweat and dirt.
- Keep your blankets, pad, and cinch clean.

Saddle fitting is a process. Arm yourself with information, talk to your retailer, professional or the saddle manufacturer for information on the product you are interested in. Remember - it's just common sense saddle fitting, so go out and ride.

Conditioning

- A horse is no different from a human athlete; horses get sore muscles when they are not in shape. Long trail rides, once a month barrel races, or competitions when a horse is not in the proper condition will make a horse's back sore. When you apply pressure to an unconditioned horse's back you will get swelling which accentuates or creates saddle fit issues. If you feel heat or swelling after long or strenuous use of your horse, let his back rest and heal.
- Do not jump to the conclusion that your saddle does not fit if you find your horses back is sore due to being in poor condition. A horse's back will drop when it is not in condition or is overweight. When this happens, bridging of the saddle tree can occur. Strong abdominal muscles support and straighten the back of both the horse and the rider. Daily riding and conditioning will keep your horse's back tough and strong.

Rider Balance

- Consider how you sit in the saddle. For the tree to function properly you must sit balanced in the saddle. If you are sitting in the saddle like a recliner with your legs out in front, you are exerting twice as much force on the back of the bars, and digging the bars into the horse's loins. The rider must sit in a balanced position, vertically with your legs under you-this will allow the bars of the tree to function properly, spreading pressure equally front to back.
- Heavy riders require the tree to distribute more pounds per square inch on the horse. For this reason, proper saddle fit and equitation is even more important with the heavy rider.

How NOT to sit in the saddle. Sitting balanced benefits your horse and helps you ride better too.