

SADDLE FITTING HOW-TO

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Most people realize that the way the saddle fits their horse is paramount to the horse's comfort, well-being, and performance, but the way in which to gauge the proper fit of their saddle often eludes the best and most experienced riders. Learning how to check your horse's saddle for proper fit and diagnosing saddle fit problems is crucial. Below are some tips for analyzing your saddle's fit.

ALWAYS REMEMBER...

when fitting a saddle, your horse MUST be standing squarely – you'll need to enlist the help of an assistant that can keep your horse standing still and square.



The tree points should be approximately 2" from the edge of the horse's shoulder blade

- First and foremost, the saddle has to be correctly positioned on the horse's back, and the tree of the saddle has to fit the horse.
- Place the saddle on the horse's back without a pad, making sure that the points of the tree are roughly two inches behind the horse's scapula (shoulder blade). Be careful not to place the saddle too far forward on the horse's back, impeding the shoulder and ultimately resulting in discomfort for the horse.
- Check to see that the tree points are parallel to the horse's shoulder.
- Next, check that the saddle is balanced on the horse's back with plenty of wither clearance.
- Imagine a line going through the center of the stirrup bar, perpendicular to the ground. Imagine next a second line going through the deepest part of the seat, also perpendicular to the ground. The deepest part of the seat should be approximately 6" – 7" from the center of the stirrup bar.
- Now ensure that the saddle does not lie behind the 18th Thoracic Vertebrae (corresponding with the horse's last rib), as it will be resting on the weaker lumbar vertebrae, and will inevitably cause soreness in the horse's back. To find the 18th Thoracic Vertebrae, gently trace your fingers over the horse's ribcage until you find the last rib. Run your fingers up the last rib until it meets the spine. That is the last acceptable weight bearing surface of the horse's back. Your saddle should not extend beyond that point.
- Be certain that the pommel will in no way rest upon the horse's wither. While horses without a sharply defined wither will have more clearance in the pommel than a horse whose wither is more distinctly shaped, as long as the high-withered horse doesn't have the saddle sitting directly on its wither with the rider in the saddle, the "2 or 3 finger rule" doesn't have to strictly be applied.



The saddle should sit level, with the deepest part of the seat perpendicular to the ground.

- Check that the panels fit the shape of the horse's back. Rest one hand firmly on the pommel and run the other hand under the panels of the saddle, making sure there is even contact everywhere along the panel and that as much surface area is in contact with the horse's back as possible.
- Make sure that there aren't any areas that are tighter than others – all parts of the panel must fit evenly.
- Finally, check that the gullet channel is wide enough to allow room for the spine to move but not so wide that there is too little surface area to distribute the weight of the rider.

Assuming that everything checks out, go ahead and girth up the saddle (still without a pad) and repeat the process, checking again that the panels lie flush against the horse's back without any areas feeling tighter than others.

- If you're taking saddles out on trial and are unsure if they're a good fit, this is a good time to take photographs to bring into the store. Again, your horse must be standing square, and the saddle should be girthed up without a pad.
- Take pictures of the horse's left and right sides as well as his back to illustrate how the panels fit (you'll probably want to get on a mounting block for this – just do so carefully!)

Once it is determined that the saddle will fit the horse, it is safe to go ahead and ride in it using the pads you'll ordinarily ride in. Ideally, the amount of padding used is minimal, as bulky pads ultimately alter saddle fit and can affect the rider's center of gravity, throwing her off balance.

While test-riding the saddle, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I feel balanced in the saddle, with my legs underneath me? Do I have to shift to get into the proper position, or does the saddle put me in the right frame?
- Is the placement of the thigh blocks (if any) putting my legs in the correct position?
- How is the twist? Does it feel too wide? Too narrow?
- How is my horse moving and behaving? Is he moving freely? Is he relaxed? Is he pinning his ears or swishing his tail?
- Does the saddle shift around while I'm riding in it, or does it stay put?



Note that the panels lie perfectly against the horse's back.

Remember that because a saddle is a major investment, the decision to purchase a saddle should not be rushed. Only make an offer or buy a saddle that you feel fits both you and your horse as perfectly as possible.

Also, because horses do change shape, it is wise to regularly check the fit of your saddle every three months or so to be sure it isn't causing your horse any discomfort.