

Placement of the Driving Saddle

By Myrna Rhinehart

A well-fitted driving harness is akin to good, comfortable shoes. Likewise, an ill-fitting harness can be as irritating as shoes that are too small or too narrow, or ones that are too big and flop around. Because of this, a well-fitting harness is also a safer harness.

You may have heard some people say that two-wheeled cart shafts should “float” in the tugs (shaft loops) of the saddle. The more correct description is that they should rest lightly and stay down. If the shafts have air around them in the tugs, the shafts are more likely bouncing up and down, which in turn actually slams up on the horse’s girth and slams down on the horse’s back with every stride, especially at the trot. Not only is this uncomfortable for the horse, but it also creates a horrible ride for the driver/passenger(s). The solution for this is really under the topic of fitting a vehicle but mentioning this does help explain why the driving saddle fit is so important. There is some weight, albeit fairly minor comparatively in a well-fitted and constructed vehicle, to be borne by the horse’s back through the saddle.

You might also hear experienced carriage drivers talk about gullet clearance on a driving saddle. This is because there are a lot of inexpensive harnesses on the market that don’t provide any spine relief in any capacity. A good driving saddle provides good spine relief for any shape horse. For more on this topic, see our article on Saddle Gullet Clearance.



The largest difference in the placement of a driving saddle verses a riding saddle is that the bearing surface of a driving saddle should be well-behind the horse’s withers. A common newbie mistake is to place the saddle on top of or near the withers. The driving saddle should, in no way, touch the withers. Putting the saddle too far forward also usually makes the girth too far forward, which can gall the elbow. Strap saddles without trees are likely culprits of girths that must be tight in order for the saddle to remain in the right position side-to-side on the horse. If your saddle wants to slip side-to-side without the girth attached, it most likely does not fit your horse's back and/or is made incorrectly or poorly.

Left: Saddle placed way too far forward. The saddle is actually resting on the withers and the girth is right up behind the elbow. This is incorrect. I can't get my fingers between the saddle and her withers.

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A well-made driving saddle that fits the horse should rest on what I like to call the “sweet spot” on the back, not rock side to side, and it should also lay flat on the back without rocking or tipping.

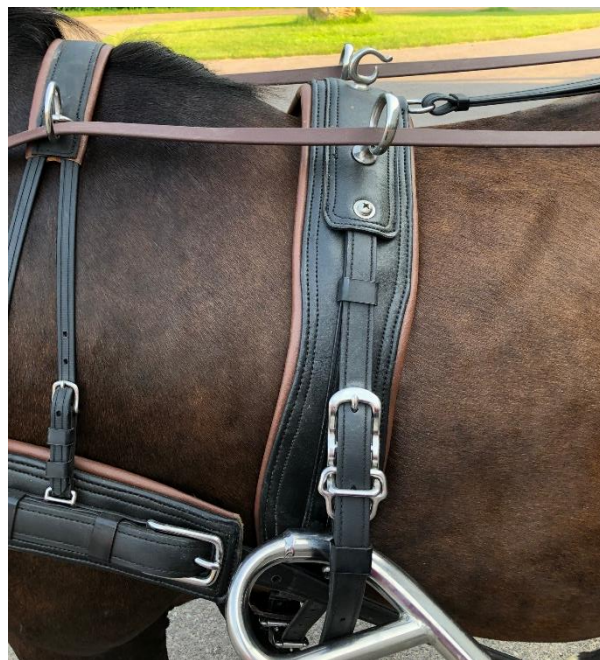
Right: Saddle placed correctly. The saddle is well-behind the horse’s withers, I can get my fingers underneath the saddle at the spine, and the girth is away from the elbow. Since this pony is well-sprung (or more like in “winter weight”), I need to leave a girth a little looser or it will migrate towards the narrowest location which is right behind the elbow.



Above: I like a flat hand’s width between the elbow and the girth. Again, because this saddle fits her back on top, it doesn’t rock side-to-side, and therefore her girth can be kept appropriately looser.

Right: Saddle placed correctly. Without the winter hair, you can see there is plenty of gullet clearance above the spine so the horse can move properly. The girth is well-back from the elbow and is not too tight.

So do your driving horse a favor and place the saddle well-behind his withers. He will be much more comfortable and happier for it!



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