Seven Saddle-Fit Points that Every Rider Should Know

By Debbie Witty

How many times have you heard the phrase “saddle-fitting nightmare?” The frustration of having you and your horse uncomfortable, not performing well or experiencing pain because your saddle does not fit can be quite overwhelming and even debilitating.

Saddle fitting is an integral piece of a large puzzle. These puzzle pieces consist of your support system: your veterinarian, farrier, dentist, body worker, trainer, saddle fitter and most of all, the rider. These professionals can help to assess the behavior and performance of your horse. A horse with a saddle-fitting problem may exhibit or start to display new behaviors while being groomed and saddled, such as pinned ears, biting, kicking and girthiness. We regularly see the horse sore in his back as compensation for other problems. That is why a whole horse evaluation is imperative to evaluate and eliminate each point of concern.

When choosing a saddle fitter look for word-of-mouth referrals, a Society of Master Saddlers (SMS) of England Qualified Saddle Fitter or a fitter who works for a reputable company. Check them out by interviewing them on the phone asking them how they conduct their business, what they charge when evaluating a saddle that is not their own brand and listen to the questions they ask. A fitter’s responsibility is to educate you without automatically condemning your saddle and trying to sell you a new one. Find a fitter who will evaluate your saddle objectively and if possible, help you to make your current saddle fit to the best of the ability of that saddle. The fitter should explain your options thoroughly. It may be you need to use shims or a fleece pad as a temporary method of making your horse level in his body or comfortable.

To maximize your horse’s comfort, I recommend a wool-flocked saddle. To keep your saddle in top condition, I suggest routine servicing, which means keeping it level in the panels, balanced for horse and rider and the wool well organized. The more miles you have in the saddle the sooner it may need servicing to keep it at top performance. If you ride 2-3 times a week you may only need to have your saddle serviced once a year. Full-time riders may need servicing every 6-9 months. A horse that is coming back from a layoff is in a new training program or has had significant weight changes may need servicing after three months. Be a thinking consumer: Routine flocking maintenance may be all that you need, or you may need to have all the wool replaced.

On a routine basis do quick safety checks. This will include a quick tug on the nylon where the billets are connected, checking the stitching that attaches your billets and looking for cracking or tearing on the billets. The same general review of the stitching and leather is important for your stirrup leathers and girth, where you should assess the strength of the elastic as well.

If your saddle takes a fall, with or without your horse, check your tree for soundness by putting the back of the saddle against the front of your hips. Hold the saddle on each side of the pommel and pull toward you listening for the rivets in the head plate to squeak or pop as well as observing the seat leather for slight, even wrinkling. If you notice any unusual noises coming from your saddle you will want to have your saddle evaluated by a Master Saddler.

In the year 2000 I was tested and became a Qualified Saddle Fitter with the Society of Master Saddlers of England. During the process of becoming an SMS fitter we were introduced to the seven points of saddle fitting. This system of checkpoints is without the weight of the rider, minus the girth or pad, with your hand applying firm centered pressure straight down to the pommel or center of the saddle:

1. Gullet Width
The gullet should be a minimum of approximately 2.5 inches or three fingers in the length of the channel of the saddle in its width. Confirm that there is no lateral pressure against the sides of the withers or spine. The desired effect is to have the width of the gullet adequate enough to sit around the spinal process--on the fat and muscle--with no pressure on the spine.

Checking for Panel Pressure

2. Adequate Clearance through the Pommel
Initially the saddle is unloaded or ungirthed with pressure down on the middle of the pommel, the saddle will sit with a clearance of approximately 2.25 inches or three or more fingers stacked vertically between the top of the withers and the bottom of the pommel (new saddles could be more). Too close to the withers means the saddle is wide, and too much clearance (with a moderate wither) can indicate that the saddle is too narrow--both scenarios can create discomfort and an imbalance in the saddle.

When the saddle is girthed with the saddle pad that will be used and the rider is mounted, the wool will compress. Start warming up at a walk. Keep your eye on how quickly the wool is compressing when mounted--we are seeking clearance maximum of three fingers or 2 1/4 inches, minimum of two snug fingers with stable compressed wool. Another consideration is the conformation of the horse: Usually, the more angular the horse the more attentive you need to be so that the withers are not exposed to pressure (and the more often the saddle may require re-flocking). The round-bodied horse does not have the same concerns with pressure on the top of the withers.

3. Angle of Tree Matches Angle of the Horse's Body
Here, we are checking for even pressure. This evaluation includes running your hand beneath the entire length, about one inch or more from the front edge of the panel--you will feel where the rigid structure sits. Each horse can accept a different amount of pressure. As noted earlier, once the rider is aboard there will be a dramatic change in the pressure along the length of the front of the tree. A doughy-bodied horse may have more sinkage into his fleshy body and experience more significant but even pressure and be comfortable. The angular horse will have a different set of concerns. The bonier the body the less protection they have and the more sensitive they will become.

4. Point Pressure
The end of the tree point is an obvious place to check for excessive and localized pressure. Recheck for even pressure, or how you can create even pressure. Then evaluate why there is pressure--can those spots be softened or flattened? Does the saddle sit too low so that the points are too far down the horse's body? Can you make it right by adding a pad, artificially making the horse’s body larger so that the saddle is sitting up with the correct amount of clearance? Or is it just too narrow with too much clearance and too much pressure down through the tree angle?

5. Balance of Saddle
The whole objective of saddle fit is to create a position to enable the rider to sit over the top of her leg for proper ear-shoulder-hip-heel alignment. If the saddle is sitting with the cantle low and the pommel too high, the rider will be sitting in a chair seat with her leg out in front of them. When the cantle is too high and the saddle sits with the pommel too low the rider will feel like she is falling forward. Then you must consider how the horse lifts its body when it travels and find the happy medium for all gaits.

6. Panel Coverage
We want the panel to accommodate the horse's back to the best of the saddle’s ability, both laterally and longitudinally. There should be no huge gaping holes, but just enough space for your fingertips between the panel and the horse's back. Check the saddle panel laterally from the gullet out to the edge of the gusset to see if the angle of the panel follows the angle of the horse’s back. We are seeking as much panel on the horse’s back as possible for pressure distribution. Use the same thoughts to test the rest of the panel.

To evaluate bridging: During bridging the saddle panel creates pressure on each side of a hollow spot where the panel does not lie evenly on the horse's back. The void will be noted primarily in the center of the panel length-wise. This situation will occur with a horse with a curvy or low back that doesn't lift through the center of his back significantly and has a saddle panel that is very flat. This will create a gaping hole between the panel and the back of the horse. Another source of bridging is when the saddle is placed or slides forward; there will be an enormous hollow at the base of the withers. After confirming that you have the correct tree, the solution here is to fix the forward movement of the saddle.

Bridging will create pressure that will exaggerate the low spot as the horse tries to escape the discomfort. The horse will then experience muscle atrophy. Just remember there can be a bit of room, approximately enough to stick the tips of your fingers in, but not up to your middle knuckles. However, if you fill that easement in you can make the panel actually create a great deal of pressure. Sometimes the curviness in the horse's back will lift to fit a flat panel very well. A high percentage of the time if the panel is flocked to accommodate the static fit (standing) curviness of the horse's back, the saddle will not be stable and the horse will become sore when he moves.

With one hand applying weight to the center of the seat of the saddle, use the other hand between the panel and the horse's back to check for smooth, even contact. To evaluate the difference between bridging and room for the horse to lift, first note the amount of lift the horse will exhibit during a slight belly lift in the area of gaping. Also, checking the sweat or dirt pattern on a clean white pad will give you a wonderful opportunity to assess the entire fit.

To evaluate rocking: Place your fingertips on the pommel and cantle, applying light weight to each at the same time. Then create more weight first on the pommel then on the cantle. The saddle will rock like the rockers on a rocking chair. This will be your regular observation of a saddle that rocks--the panel is too round, curvy or sausage-like in those critical areas. The tree may be too curvy and the panel is not properly designed to accommodate a normal back. A large percentage of the time the saddle will need to be flattened and softened through the waist, at the back of the flap. Upon palpation you will be able to detect discomfort at the back of the shoulder blade and usually at the back of the flap through the waist. Sometimes you will find broken hairs and friction spots. This is created from the saddle rocking to the back and shoving forward and bumping behind the shoulder blades.

Rocking- note how the panel sweeps off from the back.

7. 18th Rib

Palpate until you find the back of the rib cage. Gently follow the rib cage up toward the spine. Depending upon how much flesh the horse carries, you may have to estimate the angle of how the rib ties into the spine. The back of the panel should not extend beyond the 18th rib due to lack of structural (rib cage) support.

Palpating the 18th rib

After completing the seven steps the saddle now must be evaluated with the saddle pad, girth and the rider in the saddle. It is time to observe how the locomotion of the horse affects the saddle and the rider as well as how the saddle affects the movement of the horse and the ability of the rider to ride effectively.

We are seeking balance, straightness and stability as the horse works through the warm up, the body of the work and cool down, tracking left and right. Once again have an assistant check for adequate clearance so that the saddle is not interfering and creating undo pressure. Often if the rider tests the space under the pommel mounted, the pommel will crush down as the rider leans forward.

At times the saddle may not be perfectly straight because of weakness or training challenges but we are looking for the saddle to continue to return to straightness as we change the exercise or rein. The most difficulty will be in canter because it is the most complex gait to keep the horse straight, control the outside shoulder and lifting through his body evenly on both sides, especially on circles.

The balance of the saddle is indicated by the proper alignment of the rider's body and the fact that the rider can easily stay over their leg. Saddle stability can be noted when there is excessive bouncing in the back of the saddle, especially in rising trot.