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Fitting the Western or English Saddle to the Horse

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Introduction

Many times when looking to buy a saddle, comfort of the rider is the foremost thought. (See “Inspecting and Buying a New or Used Saddle (AG/Equine/2008-04pr) and “Selecting a Saddle to Fit the Rider,” AG/Equine/2008-06pr.) Important as rider comfort is, comfort for the horse is as critical, yet often overlooked. There are many aspects that should be considered when fitting a saddle to the horse. The type, size and build of saddle, along with the conformation of the horse, all play a part in a proper fit.

If purchasing a saddle, be sure to know what type of riding it will be used for so the appropriate saddle type can be obtained. Saddles for barrel racing are different from cutting or roping saddles; and saddles for dressage are different from cutback saddle seat or hunter type saddles. If you don’t know enough about saddles to identify which type would be most appropriate, visiting with a saddle maker or professional horseperson may be helpful. Especially helpful are tack shops that make saddles, as they typically have more expertise in the area of saddle fitting.

Conformation

The horse’s conformation will play an important role in how a saddle fits. A horse that is low in the back (sway backed) (Figure 1a) will be very difficult to fit as typically the saddle will place weight only on the front and rear portions with no pressure along the length of the back (Figure 1a). This causes pain on the pressure points and the

horse will find it difficult to work comfortably. A horse level through the back will be easier to fit

(Figure 1b). A horse low in the withers (mutton withered) (Figure 3) will have excessive pressure at the wither region as the saddle tends to slide forward.

Figure 1a. Sway back. Pressure points from saddle



Figure 1b. Level back.



Figure 3. Low withers.



A horse that is very short in the back region can have problems carrying the typical Western saddle, as it may be too long for its back. An English saddle may be more appropriate in this case. Problematic horses can be very difficult to fit. The following information may help with selecting a saddle.

Pressure that is not distributed evenly will create a “pressure point,” and will be an area prone to musculoskeletal problems. These problems can range from soreness and deep bruising to open, rub sores. Two of the most common problem areas are in the front (withers) and toward the back where the loin and hip joint. These problem areas can be amplified with conformational issues such as those described above.

The musculoskeletal system is designed to facilitate motion. As such, there are areas that need to have freedom to move, flex, and perform function. With the horse, the shoulder and hip areas must have freedom of motion. Tack that is excessively restrictive in these areas can potentially lead to musculoskeletal problems. We often call this fluidity of motion “balance.” Balanced horses, when tacked up, will move with ease and give the perception that the tack is part of their body. Figure 12 illustrates areas where tack should be kept to a minimum if at all.

When checking the fit of a saddle, it should be placed directly on the horse’s back without saddle pads. Blankets or pads may cover up any fitting problems. Make sure the horse is standing squarely. Step back from the saddle and evaluate how it sits on the horse’s back. It should sit level with the top of the cantle and pommel in line with each other (Figure 4a & 4b) Or, in some cases, the cantle slightly higher. Some cantles



Figure 4a.



Figure 4b.

may be higher just due to design. One should be concerned if the pommel is higher than the cantle as it may mean that the saddle does not fit correctly at the withers and it may apply uneven pressure on the horse’s back. It may also cause the rider to sit incorrectly in the saddle.

Parts of the Saddle



To further evaluate the fit, step behind the horse (making sure that you are not in a position to get kicked) and evaluate if the saddle sits level across the back (Figure 5). A saddle that sits leaning to one side will cause pressure points which will lead to soreness over time and is not comfortable for the horse or rider. Tipping to one side can indicate a saddle or a horse problem. The saddle may have uneven stuffing (English) in the panels (Figure 6) that contact the horse’s back, or uneven fleece (Western).



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

Panels

Tipping could also indicate a broken tree which will constantly be a problem for the horse. The tree is the skeleton of the saddle, found underneath the leather and determines how the saddle fits.

After checking for levelness, check for fit at the withers. Evaluate if the width of the saddle fits the horse. Western saddle trees come in a variety of widths, including Quarter Horse, Semi-Quarter Horse or Arabian bars, just to name a few.

Still without pads under the saddle, determine how many fingers fit vertically between the withers and the bottom of the gullet. Two or two and a half fingers indicates the saddle is adequate in width (Figure 7). If 3 or more fingers fit here it may indicate the saddle is too narrow which may cause pressure on the horse's spinal column and pinch the withers (Figure 8). Fewer fingers indicate that the saddle is too wide and will sit on the horse's withers causing pressure and pain on the spinous processes.

Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Determining clearance down the length of the spine is easier in English type saddles than western.

With English saddles one can stand behind the horse and evaluate the width between the panels. There should be no pressure on the spine and the panels should sit about half an inch on either side of the spine to allow for this clearance (Figure 9). Western saddles do not allow an individual to look down the center from behind. Instead, one can feel

Figure 9.



beside the withers at the gullet for proper fit. A hand can also be run down the length of the back under the saddle from the side. Feel for adequate space on either side of the spine. Another procedure is to slide your hand under the weight bearing part of the saddle to feel for even pressure distribution (Figure 10).

Figure 10.



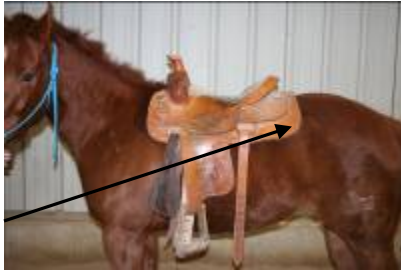
If you feel solid pressure and then come to an area that allows your hand to move freely with little or no pressure this would indicate a problem with the fit of the saddle.

The length of saddle is another aspect that needs to be accessed. The weight bearing portion of the western saddle ends just behind the cantle contacting the back region only, not the loin area. If weight is carried over the loin, soreness will develop due to the lack of skeletal support under this area. It may also prevent the horse from using its hindquarters efficiently due to fatigue setting in more quickly. Also, determine where the end of the skirt falls. The skirt should be well in advance of the horse's hip bone, as a saddle that is too long in the skirt can interfere as the horse bends and turns (Figure 11).

Typically the English saddle is shorter in length and does not extend past the horse's back region.

Placement of the saddle is very important in evaluating fit and also in not interfering with how

Figure 11.



Skirt of saddle too far back near point of hip

Figure 12.



Taped areas indicate areas that should be free of pressure.

the horse moves. Many times saddles are placed too far forward over the withers causing pressure on the horse's shoulder blades. Make sure to place the saddle behind the shoulder so the horse is not restricted in its movement. Placing the saddle farther back will also help the horse in carrying the saddle and rider's weight (Figure 12.) The horse already carries 60 to 65% of its weight on its front end so with a more forward saddle more weight is carried over that area. The horse's front end is more prone to breakdown and lameness due to carrying excess weight. The more the horse can work off its hind quarters the better. It allows the horse to move in a more balanced motion with less possibility of tripping and lameness up front.

Saddle fit does not remain constant throughout the life of a horse. A young horse will go through many growth spurts and changes before it matures. A saddle that fits well today may not in a few months. Also, as a horse gains or loses weight, the

saddle will fit differently. After a ride, look for even sweat marks across the back area.

If dry spots are seen, this can indicate an area with excessive pressure or rubbing, which will cause pain over time.

Summary

Riders should always consider the comfort of the horse while under saddle. Taking a few minutes to evaluate the horse and saddle will be very beneficial. Always evaluate a new saddle before using it and then periodically during the year. Taking a second to look at the horse's back as you unsaddle will also give you clues as to fit. A horse that is comfortable with its tack will give a more enjoyable ride and be able to give 100 percent when asked to work.

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