Does the SADDLE really FIT?

by Christine Woodford, DVM

Proper saddle fit – could there be a more confusing issue that plagues the meticulous equestrian? For some, the search for the perfect saddle is at best, a frustrating quest. As horse owners are becoming more in tune with the movement and balance of their horses, so is their knowledge and expectations of their equipment.

There are numerous books and publications available, clinics to attend, and "experts" on the subject. Most of the advice focuses on how to pick a saddle for that one horse, when the horse is standing still, at that particular time in that horse's life. However, a horse's conformation is dynamic. The shape of the horse changes with its age, nutrition and exercise level. Purchasing the "perfect saddle" does not guarantee that same perfect fit at a later time in that horse's life.

The ultimate goal of the saddle is to distribute the weight of the rider painlessly and evenly over the horse's back. When the saddle fits properly, it will allow maximum free movement of the horse's back, ribs, hindquarters and shoulder blades during the ride/workout. If the saddle fits poorly, the horse could have rough, choppy gaits and hollow out its back. He may carry his neck higher than usual and become less flexible. The end result of this poorly fit saddle is lack of forward motion.

Some physical signs to poor saddle fit might include:

- flinching or pinning ears while being groomed
- reluctance to pick up feet for shoeing
- refusal to stand still while being saddled or mounted
- wringing of tail or carrying tail off to one side
- short choppy gaits
- dragging toes
- head tossing, or head carriage higher than normal
- white hairs along the withers due to excess pressure and tissue damage
- muscle atrophy on one or both sides of the withers
- resistance to work

Checking for proper saddle fit is a very important part of good horsemanship and horse healthcare program. The saddle must be the correct size and style for the rider for the particular discipline of riding activity. An English saddle should allow 4 fingers of room in front and behind the rider. A western saddle should allow 4 fingers of room in front of the saddle and the rider's backside should rest comfortably against the cantle (back of the saddle). Then of course the saddle must fit the horse properly so the horse can perform at its best. Saddle fitting is a process the must be done in a stepwise manner. There are some basic rules of thumb that apply to any riding discipline. The first part of saddle fit is to check the position of the saddle when the horse is standing still. Then one must test the fit when the weight of a rider is added and then when the horse is moving.

The following are guidelines to assist you with finding the proper placement of the saddle:

- the front of the saddle (tree) should be two fingers behind the shoulder blade
- the seat of the saddle should be over the thoracic vertebrae to ensure proper distribution of the weight of the rider over the ribs of the horse
- the girth should be four fingers behind

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Christine Woodford and
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Kevin, thank you for your love and support!
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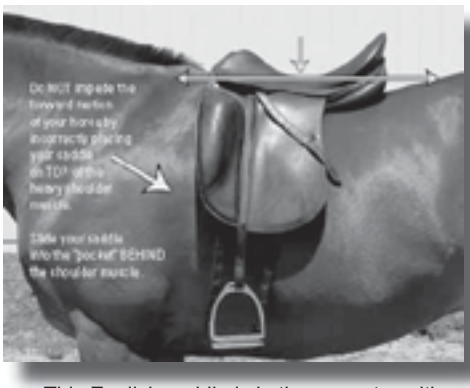
the elbow
· the saddle should be level from front to back, as shown below



This English saddle is in the correct position on the horse, with the front panel behind the shoulder blade and the seat over the thoracic vertebrae. The saddle is level from front to back.

The width of the tree and the use of saddle pads are two essential factors in saddle fit. Saddles are available in different tree widths and some saddles have adjustable tree widths. Begin to check the width of the tree by stepping to the front of the saddle and observing the fit along the horse's barrel. The tree should be wide enough so the gullet does not touch the horse's spine and the front of the saddle should follow the contour of the horse's shoulders. You should be able to run your flat hand between the horse and the saddle comfortably from both sides and in the front and the back of the saddle. An old rule of thumb is you should be able to fit four fingers' clearance from the withers to the pommel. (Pinky finger on the withers and index finger under the pommel as if you were shaking hands.) You can mold the shape of your horse's withers and ribcage with a wire hanger, trace the molded hanger on a piece of cardboard, then place the cardboard under several saddle trees to determine which tree would fit the best at that time. If you were to pick between a saddle that is too narrow or too wide, the "lesser of two evils" is the one that is too wide. You can correct this poor saddle fit with some help from a saddle pad and shims.

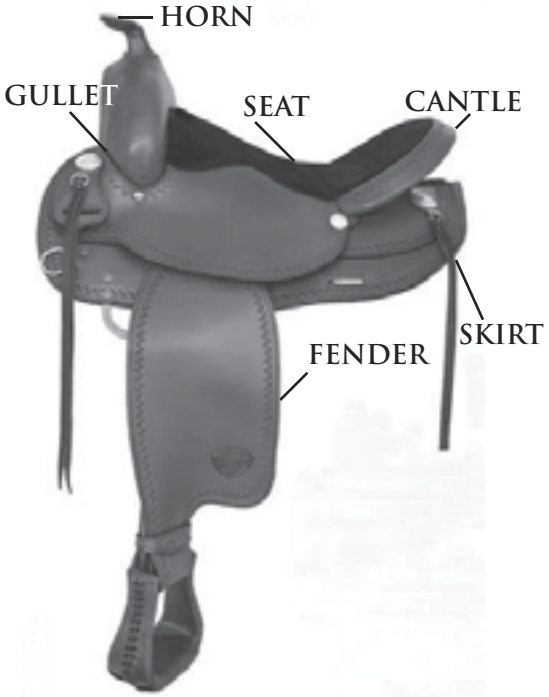
A wither tracing can be made with a flexible length of wire, as shown above.

Be careful on how much you rely on the pad to correct saddle fit issues. Many people also believe that a pad can be a buffer to a poor or tight fitting saddle. Imagine if you had a pair of shoes that were too tight. What would happen if you were to put on another, thicker pair of socks? Do you think your shoes would fit better or worse? I would imagine you would be reaching for the box of band-aids after spending some time in a tight pair of shoes with two pairs of thick socks! A thicker pad is not the solution to a tight-fitting saddle! The function of a saddle pad is to absorb sweat from the horse and to absorb shock from the rider's movement and the saddle.

Saddle fit should also be checked when the rider and motion are added. Different shapes and sizes of the rider will cause the saddle to flex in various ways. Since the job of the saddle is to distribute the weight of the rider when the horse is moving, the saddle fit must be examined when the horse is in motion and then after a workout. Today, very elaborate saddle fit testing equipment is available to the modern equestrian. Some systems involve motion and pressure detectors that are linked to a computer program to analyze the effect of the saddle on the horse. There are also special impression pads to determine if the saddle is causing areas of concern on the horse.

A starting point and a simple test to see how your current saddle fits your horse is by checking the sweat patterns made by your saddle. Put your saddle directly on the horse's back (no pad) and ride in it long enough to generate a sweat pattern. When you take the saddle off, check for an even sweat pattern the entire length of the back muscles on each side of the spine. If there are areas that have no sweat marks, these are the areas that are not making contact with the horse, and thus the saddle is not distributing the weight of the rider evenly. These are the areas that will need

Some parts of the western saddle



extra padding or flocking in the saddle. You want to fill in the areas that are not making contact with your horse's back by "shimming," or adding padding, in that area. Important to remember is this "shim" should not cross your horse's spine, or you will be creating the "tight sock effect" as mentioned earlier.

In conclusion, there are several books, websites and equestrian professionals dedicated to saddle fitting advice. The basic component of testing your saddle should include checking the fit of the saddle to the rider, checking the placement of the saddle on the horse and then checking the saddle fit to the horse. The saddle should be checked when the horse is standing still, when the weight of the rider is added, and then when movement is added. When you have determined that the saddle is correctly fitted, periodically recheck the saddle fit. This should be done about every 2-4 months depending on the activity level of the horse and rider. The saddle will experience wear and tear and both you and your horse can change shape as you both become better trained. So remember – optimal saddle fit is a constant endeavor, as is the journey of horsemanship.

With an interest in lameness and performance horses, Dr. Woodford pursued academic studies in alternative therapies. In 2006, Dr. Woodford became certified in Animal Chiropractic by the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association. In 2007, she became certified in Equine Veterinary Acupuncture by the Chi Institute in Florida.

In 2008, Dr. Woodford founded Veterinary Integrative Performance Services, Inc. (VIPs). Her overall goal is to keep the body balanced through chiropractic and acupuncture to optimize the animal's health and performance. Integrating the various forms of therapy can decrease the possibilities of injuries and improve the wellbeing of our equine and canine friends. To learn more about the company and Dr. Woodford, visit www.vipsvet.net.