

SADDLE FITTING - AN ENDURING WESTERN MYTH

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A popular topic among both leatherworkers and horse owners today is saddle fitting. Perfectly fitting a saddle to an individual animal is one of those things in life that sounds good in theory but in the real world simply does not work and is highly impractical. There are too many variables, both short term and long term, which are constantly changing.

The “saddle fitting” advice should come from those who have spent years studying the art and craft of saddlemaking and who have a better than average knowledge of riding styles and equine anatomy. This background is essential to understand what can and cannot be done within the parameters of saddle building. Our goal should be to find a saddle that will fit as closely as possible, under changing conditions, and that will compliment the back of the horse when used in these conditions. The variables are; the Horse, the Rider and the Saddle itself. Another consideration that fits into this picture is Economics.

The Fit is a determination of how the first three variables interact and compliment or oppose each other. It has been stated, “the saddle is both the central and the stabilizing force wedged between two very flexible and changing objects”. To consider the saddle as having primary control over fit versus the ever-changing rider is simply absurd. This is well understood by most experienced saddle makers and why most of them do not conduct saddle-fitting clinics. Many equine clinics are conducted by those with varied equine skills, but are untrained and unskilled in saddle construction. They seem to have a miracle product or system using everything from old fashioned coat hangers to new age plastics and aluminum “fitting gauges” to create the perfect saddle fitting utopia. These “snake oil salesmen” are only looking to increase their income and prestige by making reasonable sounding claims that cannot be demonstrated as possible in the real world. The true student of proper saddle fit must consider the riding style, riding conditions and the condition of the animal (the primary cause of saddle problems today). The economics of the situation must also be evaluated. Most of us do not have unlimited money to purchase an individually fitted saddle for every horse we own or may purchase in the future.

There is no such thing as perfectly fitting a saddle to a horse!! Allow me to illustrate ... Did you buy your own shoes because they fit perfectly ... or

because “they didn’t hurt”? Yet by buying the standard shoes available our feet are generally trouble free. Fit and comfort are two different variables, but related. Do the shoes you wore at 21 feel just as good at 45? Not for most folks! We must realize that fit is a judgment based on many ever-changing variables. When analyzing saddles and horses we must remember it is an inexact art form for which no one has all the answers. The horseman who rides with skill, has quality tack, keeps his horse in good physical condition and monitors these three essential elements will rarely have a saddle problem.

If the saddle could be made to fit a specific horse perfectly, for his entire lifespan, shouldn’t that saddle be sold with the horse when we find a new steed to replace him? What should we do with the saddle when the horse dies? Perhaps take it behind the barn and shoot it! Studies show that 60 percent of horse buyers sell their animal within the first year. A good number of the 40 percent who keep the animal through the first year will sell within the next 2 years. Rarely will they sell the saddle with the animal. The useful life of a quality saddle is many times longer than the useful life of any individual equine. Fitting a saddle to one animal would be limiting the usefulness of an expensive product.

A saddle is nothing more than a backpack for an animal. How many of us (even very serious hikers) have a specially fitted backpack? We go to the nearest sporting goods store and purchase a pack that suits our needs, has an appearance that pleases us and affords the comfort and flexibility we desire. Our horses deserve the same consideration and courtesy. Many people have several animals but only 2 or 3 saddles. Common sense dictates that we have a saddle that will fit the majority of our animals. I often have clients tell me “My trainer says saddle made to fit my horse precisely”. My response is to ask “How many saddles does your trainer have and how many horses does he ride?” Most trainers have 3 to 5 saddles and ride 20 or more horses in a season. Are they concerned with “exact fit” or animal comfort?

Why then is saddle fitting such a large topic and why do we have so many problems? Simply because we do not want our horses developing sores which is uncomfortable for them and limits our riding time. Let us examine the most common cause of saddle sores.

Most sores are caused by the rider not the saddle! Some time ago I attended a seminar that discussed saddle fitting. The speaker had an electronic pad that measured the pressure points under the saddle and displayed a colorful “map” of these points on a computer screen. Three different riders rode one

horse with the same saddle and pressure points were measured. Pressure varied all over the animal's back depending on riding style. This animal then would require three different saddles.... ridiculous! Many horsemen ride without proper balance, too high on the cantle, off to one side and generally uncollected. These riding faults cause problems, which are transmitted through the saddle, which are not the fault of the saddle at all. Many riders make the mistake of riding the saddle and not the animal!

A good custom saddle is made with emphasis on fitting the rider more than the horse. This is done to eliminate rider movement in the saddle, thereby eliminating pressure points on the horse as much as possible.

The animal's condition must also be carefully monitored by the rider. The majority of problems with saddles are caused by people who do not properly condition their animal. Without proper training and conditioning we go out and put in a 20 or 30-mile ride. Or worse we go on a weeklong hunting or packing trip in less than ideal weather conditions. Animals must be conditioned and built up to this type of riding. During this conditioning process their muscles develop and their skin toughens much as we develop calluses for hard work.

I had a gentleman say "I am a serious rider and put in 30 miles at a time. I use many saddles and they all sore up my horse. What do you suggest?" I asked him if he was riding 10 miles at a time at least 3 days per week as conditioning for himself and the horse. His reply was "Well, no, I have many obligations and just do not have that kind of time. However, I do ride 30 miles every three or four weeks as time permits." His problem has nothing to do with the saddle! The problem is a lack of conditioning. Human nature is such that rather than face our own limitations we find some other factor to blame. Good riding is a process of monitoring ourselves, our animal and our equipment and making adjustments if needed. Many ignore these things until they unsaddle and then exclaim, "Oh, my, look what this saddle did" never realizing or admitting that their lack of observation and adjustment is the true cause of the problem.

An animal's body is constantly shifting both in condition and in conformation. A saddle, which is very comfortable for a horse at 3 years of age, will set differently when he is 7, 12, 15. Will the suit we had tailored to our trim frame at 24 fit the same when we are 48? Why should we expect a horse and saddle to be different? Our animal's body shape changes from season to season as they gain and lose weight and even during the course of a day's ride. Notice how your saddle sets differently after a 20-mile ride, even

on a well-conditioned horse. This is one reason why that rig that looked perfect at the clinic or tack shop suddenly doesn't seem to be doing such a great job. This type of "saddle fitting" only tells us that the saddle will not harm the animal where it is placed while he is standing still! The important position is where it crawls to when in motion. Saddle position may vary a great deal during a single ride to the action of the back muscles and the terrain being traversed.

Another reason for saddle sores is that most riders don't understand the advantages and necessity of a quality saddle. The recent interest in "saddle fitting science" recently is in direct proportion to the number of new owners who are beginning to acquire basic riding skills and are doing so in poorly constructed, entry level saddles. This combination gives many a very negative experience, which is then focused on the saddle. Although the individual saddle is not the primary factor affecting fit it is the catalyst molding man and animal as a unit and must be created with quality materials. Saddles under \$1600 are the low end of the market. They are generally mass produced of middle or low quality materials and are intended for entry level and light usage riders. The top end of the mass produced market is generally much more ornate with abundant silver decorations but not necessarily better constructed. Remember, "a garbage truck with a Charles Russell painting on the side still smells like garbage".

Saddles in the middle price and above range are usually built by craftsmen who have spent their lives studying saddles and saddle construction. Artists who, themselves, are usually pretty good horsemen and who have studied many others horseback. Cowboy's in the old west, realizing the importance of a quality saddle, allotted two to four months pay for their saddle (far less for their horse). In today's dollars this would be \$5000 to \$8000. A quality saddle showed their commitment to their profession and a level of concern for their mount, an example many today could benefit from. This, and their animal's better conditioning, is why they didn't have today's level of problems. Today's average new owner does not budget in the cost of real quality equipment and the horse is the one to suffer the consequences. If sores develop on a long ride in an entry level saddle it is because the saddle is not being used as intended. Serious riding requires a serious saddle.

Often owners come to my saddle shop and inquire into the cost of a nice custom rig for their very special, favorite horse. When I tell them they often exclaim, "Oh, I couldn't spend that much on just a saddle". Then they go back to the parking lot and get into their \$45,000 pickup pulling a \$15,000

trailer (both of which are depreciating in value daily!). The saddle would be more make for a more comfortable riding experience for them and their horse and would be useful (and hold its value) for the next 40 years.

A common cause of saddle problems is the result of the blankets or pads. Dirt, sweat and debris collect on the blanket and form a hard crust. This rubs on the back of an animal and can cause severe discomfort and soreness. Cleaning blankets and pads frequently will pay big dividends. Use only the amount of pad required. Too much padding requires cinching too tightly and may cause cinch sores. Also, placing the blanket properly is important. A twisted blanket can cause a great deal of pressure in areas under the saddle. Many riders then blame this on the saddle rather than acknowledging their error.

Another problem is often the size of the cinch. The purpose of the cinch is to anchor the saddle to the horse as comfortably as possible. The cinch should not interfere with the horse's action. The width should vary according to the position of the rigging plates as follows; full position — 17 strand cinch 7/8 position — 19 strand cinch 3/4 position — 21 strand cinch Using a cinch that is wider than necessary in any position would extend too far forward and the foreleg of the horse would be constantly rubbing on it, which would result in chafing and sores in that area.

Super-wide roping cinches have become popular in recent years. Wide cinches have their place when roping heavy cattle and should not be pulled very tight, except while roping. They have no place on the pleasure or trail horse. Most riders think that this wide cinch is more humane and doesn't cut into "Old Paint", but the truth is that the wider cinch must be pulled tighter to hold the saddle as well and this tightness creates a corset effect across the horse's chest. Restricted breathing is not a desirable trait! It is much better to have the right size cinch and not have to tighten it so much!

At each end of the cinch is the ring. This is used to run the latigos through when tying to the saddle. There are three styles of rings: round ring, ring with-buckle-tongue, and ring with-crossbar. The round ring is found on the cheapest of cinches and can only be used by tying the latigo. The round ring with-buckle-tongue is an improvement because it eliminates the bulk of a cinch knot, however, when the tongue is attached at the bottom of the ring it is also considered cheap. This arrangement can become ineffective if the pressures on the ring should make it oval. When the ring becomes oval the tongue goes through the ring and doesn't work to lock the latigo in place. I see many riders using this type of ring with a knot and allowing the tongue to

hang loose. This is a potential hazard to man and horse!

The best cinch ring is the ring with-crossbar. The crossbar prevents the ring from being pulled into an oval and the tongue is much shorter and less hazardous. The ideal ring with-crossbar is made with a flat profile (more surface area distributes pressure wider), a flat top surface (prevents unnecessary distortion of the latigo) and a small tab on the inside bottom prevents the cords from bunching to either side of the ring. This ideal ring is made of stainless steel. The materials in a cinch are very important. In bygone days the cinches were made of horsehair. The best were from mane hair and the poor grades were from tail hair. These were very durable and seemed to work quite well, but didn't do much to absorb moisture. Other old time cinches were made of canvas or burlap. Horses get sores because of heat and moisture! The ideal cinch promotes transference of sweat away from the body and allows evaporation to cool and dry the heated area.

The best material to transfer water is cotton, but cotton loses much of its strength when wet. The next best is mohair. Mohair is a blend of Angora goat hair and Wool. It transfers water (sweat) rapidly AND becomes stronger with the addition of moisture. Mohair is also the best cinch material because it cleans easily and is best washed with mild soap (Ivory, dish soap, etc.) and water. [Be sure to rinse out all soap before putting back on the horse] Mohair cinches are expensive, but not excessively so and will last a very long time. Many cinches are made of 100% nylon, or other synthetic, cord. While these are strong they will not absorb or transfer moisture and will create a certain amount of heat.

When a problem occurs it is common today to point the finger at one variable such as the saddle or the pad and place blame there. This is way too simplistic an approach. Usually the problem is a combination of the variable we have been discussing. If we change one of these variables the problem may be temporarily eliminated but it should be monitored for some time to determine if that was the only problem. Often not!

Changing conditions mean we cannot expect the saddlemaker to take responsibility for choosing our saddle and placing it on our horse any more than we would expect the auto dealer to choose our truck and drive it for us. Anyone who places a saddle on an animal and states that it perfectly fits or does not fit is claiming they have the ability to see into the future. Changing conditions will always be present and, as horsemen, we must be aware of these conditions and react accordingly.

Owning a horse is, indeed, a lifestyle. It is a series of continual lessons and mistakes. People are so worried they are going to do something wrong that they forget how much fun it was at the beginning. Let's step back and take a look at our horses, our equipment and ourselves and relax. Most of the "saddle fitting" problems will work themselves out with a little applied logic. A good saddle should last the rest of your life. Choose it carefully and enjoy the ride!

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