

A Hands-On Approach to Saddle Fit

By Ellen Fitzgerald
Photos by Betsy Lynch

THINK BACK TO THE DAYS WHEN MOST horses were born and bred locally. There was a local saddle maker who knew every bloodline in the region and how the horses were built. He likely knew your horse's sire and dam and had probably built saddles for them. When he looked at your horse, he could see the physical features he needed to allow for.

Although there are still some people who employ custom saddle makers who actually study and measure the horses on

It's not how a saddle looks—but how it feels—that determines whether it's a good fit for your horse.

which the saddles will be used, the vast of majority us purchase manufactured saddles from tack shops—or maybe over the Internet. These saddles are intended to

be generic, made for “anyhorse USA.” We buy them because we like the way they look, or because someone in our sport or discipline recommended them or because we sat in one at the horse expo and it really cushioned our derriere. But do these saddles really fit our horses?

Only if we're really lucky! Because the truth of the matter is, you can't really tell if a saddle fits a particular horse just by looking at it or sitting in it. You have to *feel* how it sits on your horse's back. You literally have to get your hands underneath it. An expert “saddle fitter” can walk you through the process.

Modern saddle fitters are filling the void that has arisen as most of the local saddle makers disappear. They work with all types of horses and saddles to ensure that a horse works in comfort and without injury.



Expert saddle-fitter Ellen Fitzgerald believes in a hands-on approach. A saddle may look fine, yet cause a horse agony if doesn't meld nicely with the contours of his back and distribute rider weight evenly.

Touch to Tell

- ◆ Don't make your decision in the tack shop. Put the saddle on the horse's back.
- ◆ Settle the saddle just behind the horse's shoulder, where the “burr” settles into the natural dip just behind the withers.
- ◆ Slide your hand beneath the saddle front, about 4 inches in, feeling top to bottom for pressure points.
- ◆ Run your hand horizontally front to back, beneath the seat and bars, checking for gaps.
- ◆ Find the horse's last rib and compare that to the length of the tree's bars.

- ◆ Use your fingers to see how many fit between the saddle gullet and the horse's withers.



Becoming Saddle Savvy

While some people revel in riding bareback, most of us prefer to ride in a saddle. It keeps us more secure and distributes our weight more evenly over the horse's back. If our weight is too focused in one or more places with an ill-fitting saddle, our horse will be in pain. It can even lead to injuries that can debilitate a horse for the rest of his life.

A rule of thumb is that more than 2 pounds per square inch applied anywhere on the horse's back will shut down capillaries, produce white hairs, cause bumps that look like bug bites, and/or damage muscles and tissues. Even distribution of weight with no pressure points is essential.

Unfortunately, many horses and saddles are asymmetrical—in other words, they aren't built or balanced the same way on each side. This also holds true for our own physical conformation as well. This illustrates why it's so important to check both sides of the horse and the saddle for any differentials that may impact the fit, function, and comfort of the saddle on the horse's back.

Saddle Integrity

The first thing I do when I work with a saddle is to check its integrity. By this, I mean I check to see if the saddle tree seems to be intact, that all the fittings are secure, and that there is nothing on the horse side of the saddle that will irritate him.

For both western and English saddles, I will try to bend the trees, both lengthwise and across the fork or points. A western saddle should not have any give lengthwise and an English saddle should usually have a little. Neither saddle should have any flexibility in the fork or pommel area. Broken trees are usually not apparent by looking at the saddle and are not uncommon in used saddles. I have even found them in saddles that trainers loved because they are often more comfortable for the rider! Riding in a saddle with a broken tree can produce serious harm to a horse.

To check the fittings, I inspect all stitching for the rigging, billets, fenders, and stirrups, and over the rest of the saddle. When I am comfortable that the saddle is well put together, I will also check the horse side for nails, brads, and lumps that can injure or

A 5-year-old Quarter Horse mare, a 17-year-old Arabian, and a 26-year-old Thoroughbred have vastly different conformation considerations when it comes to saddle fitting. It's not a one-size-fits-all world, which is why you have to put the saddle on the individual back.





Saddle placement. Above: The burr or points of a saddle should be placed in the “pocket” of the horse’s back, behind the shoulder blade. On most horses you can feel the back edge of the shoulder/scapula. About 2 to 3 inches behind this spot, feel for a soft spot, or an actual dip. Upper right: The “burr” is the rounded portion of the tree which can be felt through the underside of the skirt below the swells about 3 to 4 inches in from the front of the saddle. Lower right: On an English saddle, these are called the “points,” and are 1 to 2 inches in from the front of the saddle.



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produce discomfort for the horse. I can’t tell you how many nails and brads I’ve removed that were in the fleece and not visible but were aimed right into the horse.

Saddle Placement

The most common saddle fit problem is not a problem with the saddle at all but with where the rider has placed the saddle. Many of us have learned to place saddles, both English and western, too far forward in alignment with the heart girth (the natural place at which the girth will settle). Many times this placement ignores the most important bone for freedom of movement—the scapula or shoulder. When placed either over the shoulder or too close to the shoulder, we restrict shoulder movement. Consequently, we also limit the reach of the forelegs and any chance at natural movement.

Just as a little experiment, press your own shoulder blade on your back with your opposing hand and move your free arm around. You can feel how much your shoulder blade

moves. Now think of a rigid piece of wood with 100 or 200 pounds of weight on top of that as you try to move your shoulder.

Proper placement of the saddle is that the burr (the rounded portion of a western tree about 3 to 4 inches in from the front on the underside) or the points (about 1 to 2 inches in from the front on an English saddle) be placed about 2 inches behind the back edge of the horse’s shoulder blade. Often the horse has a natural dip right there that the burr or points will fall into nicely. If this placement produces a slanted girth from the saddle to the horse’s heart girth, you may want to consider another saddle or rigging because there will always be tension between where the saddle needs to be and where the girth will always end up.

When you are used to riding with your

saddle placed too far forward, it will take some time for you to feel comfortable once you have moved the saddle back to its correct place. You will feel like you are driving a Cadillac when you were used to driving a VW. There will be more horse in front of you and your balance will seem very different. Ride for about three weeks, expecting it to feel odd, because it will honestly take at least this long before your mind will adjust to the new saddle position. I guarantee your horse will be happier, healthier, and a better performer as a result.

Saddle Width

When we talk about saddle width, we are referring to the width and angle at the fork or points of the saddle. In western saddles, the angle in this area is most often 90 degrees,



paid to keeping it off the horse's shoulders. Run your hands from the gullet (the opening over the withers) under the leading edge of the saddle down to where the pressure lets up, monitoring in at least 4 inches from the front of the saddle. If there are any spots that feel very tight with pretty focused pressure, the saddle is probably not the right choice for your horse. If you're unsure, try to imagine 100-plus pounds being added to this pressure point—because that's what's going to happen when you mount up!

Now look at the front of the saddle. There should be two to three finger-widths between your horse's withers and the gullet or channel. If there is more clearance, there is a good chance the saddle is too narrow for the horse. Picture a child's party hat on

Girth alignment: If proper shoulder placement produces a slanted girth from the saddle to the horse's heart girth, you may want to consider another saddle or rigging because the saddle, in this case, will always be pulled forward into the horse's shoulder.

and the measurement is usually based on the bars. The bars are the horizontal planes of the tree that rest on the horse's back. There are regular Quarter Horse, semi-Quarter Horse, full Quarter Horse bars, and more. Such designations are determined by the space between the bars on the tree at the base of the swell. Unfortunately, the distance between the bars cannot be measured once the saddle has been built around the tree. However, the width measurement is used only as a guideline. The saddle width should always be checked by placing it on the horse.

English saddles vary their widths mostly by changing the angle of the tree points in the front. English sizes are called narrow, medium, wide, or a combination of two, as in medium-wide, or the saddle size may be specified more precisely in centimeters, for example, 34 cm.

Unfortunately, in both English and western saddles, sizes differ among manufacturers—and sometimes even within a manufacturer—so never assume that a medium-wide, 34 cm, or semi-Quarter Horse bars saddle will fit your horse just because it did with another saddle. The essential point here is that you absolutely need to try the saddle on for size.

To determine if your saddle is the proper width for your horse, place it on his back without a saddle pad, with special attention



Top: Checking width and shoulder comfort. Run your hands from the gullet under the leading edge of the saddle to where the pressure lets up, monitoring in at least 4 inches from the front. If you feel your fingers being compressed, it's not a good fit. **Bottom:** Gullet or channel clearance. There should be two to three finger-widths between your horse's withers and the gullet or channel.

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your head and you get the idea. . . the points or bars will be digging into the horse's back instead of sitting parallel to it. Alternatively, if the clearance is less than two fingers, it is likely that this saddle is too wide for the horse and direct damage to the horse's spine can occur if it is used.

A good way to safeguard the spine is to check that there is adequate clearance down the entire length of the saddle. Position yourself where you can look down the gullet or channel from front to back or back to front. You should see daylight all the way through this channel. If there is any place where the saddle comes within one-half inch of the horse's spine, steer clear of that saddle. Modern medicine has shown us the fragile nature of the spine in both humans and animals, and caring for the spine should be one of our highest concerns.



Ouch! You can see that this saddle is resting on the withers. Even a standard pad will not help this harmful situation.

Bridging and Rocking

Bridging and rocking are two very different but related problems. Bridging occurs when there is more pressure or surface contact with the horse's back at the front and back of a saddle and less pressure or contact under the rider's seat. It is very common with horses who have lost topline musculing through the natural aging process or due to injury. Bridging is also common with short-backed horses like some Arabians, Morgans, Andalusians, and Quarter Horses. Bridging is also more apt to show up if a saddle has been built on a very straight tree. The right tree should mold to the contours of the horse's back.

To identify bridging, run your hand beneath the saddle under the bars or panels



Top: Bridging. When the saddle tree does not settle evenly down the length of the horse's back, but rather perches on the bars at the front and back, the effect is known as bridging. Bridging causes the rider's weight to be concentrated in these spots, producing a 'chicken/egg' dilemma. The more a horse is ridden in a saddle that bridges, the more it will drop its back due to the pressure and pain, making the saddle fit even worse. Below: Ellen runs her hand horizontally beneath skirt along the length of the bars under the seat to check for gaps or rocking. This saddle is not a good fit for this horse's back.





bove: The length of tree is important—a horse should carry weight no farther back than his last rib. A simple way to find the last rib is to first locate the point of the horse’s hip and then to slide your fingers forward until you feel the edge of the last rib. Follow this rib up and forward as it curves until you lose it under a muscle. This is the last place that should support saddle weight. Below: Ellen estimates where the bars of this saddle end by angling out from the back edge of the cantle with her right hand. Her left hand indicates this horse’s last rib. This saddle is too long for this horse because the bars extend about 2 inches farther than the last rib.



from the front of the seat to the back end of the saddle. If you notice that there is more pressure as you slide your hand toward the back of the saddle, there is probably a bridging problem with that horse and saddle combination. Going back to the weight distribution discussion, there will certainly

be more than two pounds per square inch at the four outside corners of the saddle because the center section is not supporting its share of the weight.

Rocking is the opposite weight distribution problem. When a saddle’s tree is too curved for a particular horse it will pivot or

Balanced Saddle, Balanced Rider

Your personal balance in the saddle is one of the keys to comfort for you and your horse and is essential to giving effective signals. To illustrate this, try balancing on a balance ball used in exercise programs. Once you are balanced, with your legs in a comfortable spot, move one of your feet about three inches in any direction, or roll the ball slightly forward or back beneath you. Now stay in the altered position a few minutes. Feel how your body is subtly struggling to stay balanced and how anything else you are trying to do is hindered by being out of balance.

Without realizing it, we are often in saddles that make us struggle with our balance and therefore we’re not able to be comfortable or effective.

If a saddle is pommel high (too high in front), you will fall back toward the cantle. In this case, your upper body leans back, you roll onto the cantle, and your feet tend to migrate forward. This is one of the most common fitting problems I see.

If the saddle is too high at the cantle (the back of the saddle), you will often rock forward and your feet will be forced back. In addition to having to struggle to stay balanced, you will be altering one of the primary lines of communication you have with your horse— your legs.

Saddles can fit your horse perfectly in all aspects, but still not be balanced. Your horse may be built more uphill, or he may be croup high, meaning the point of his hip is higher than the point of his withers. No matter the reason, this should be corrected with a good quality saddle pad to improve the performance of both the rider and the horse.

rock under the rider’s seat. This is less common and more difficult to identify. If a saddle with a pronounced curve is placed on a horse with a straight back (as viewed from profile), there will not be as much contact in front and back and too much pressure beneath the rider. If you have been riding in this type of saddle, you may notice a cluster of bumps on the horse’s back that look like bug bites in the seat area.

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Length

The only portion of a horse that can support our weight is his ribcage. In order to maintain his health, the bars or panels of a saddle cannot bear weight past the horse's last rib. A simple way to find the last rib is to find the point of the horse's hip, and then slide your fingers forward until you feel the edge of the last rib. From there, follow the rib up and forward until it disappears under a large muscle. This marks the farthest point on the horse's back where a rider's weight should be carried.

Since you cannot see the end of most western saddle bars, I usually estimate by measuring at a 45-degree angle from the back edge of the seat to the skirt. If this area sits beyond the last rib when the saddle is properly placed, it is too long. Unfortunately, I find many sore horses with unsuitably long western saddles. It is not uncommon for some draft crosses to have shorter saddle areas, so don't be fooled by how sturdy these horses look. They were bred to haul wagons, not to ride.

These are some of the easier aspects of saddle fitting to identify. There are more

Meet Ellen Fitzgerald of Saddlehands

Ellen Fitzgerald established SaddleHands in 2005 to help riders identify saddles that truly fit their horses in order to improve comfort, prevent pain and injury, and maximize performance. In order to maintain her objectivity with each unique horse and rider team, Ellen does not represent or sell any saddles

Ellen has two horses of her own and calls the Colorado Front Range home, but she often travels to other parts of the United States to give clinics and help riders. She trained with English and Western Saddle Masters, and continues to learn from other saddle experts and her clients, who, she says, "teach her something new every day." Ellen can be reached at 303 903-1488, ellen@SaddleHands.com. For more information, log on to her website, www.SaddleHands.com.

that are a bit more subtle, but can still make a horse unhappy. If your horse is acting up under saddle but is an angel otherwise, your saddle may be a reason. Check your saddle for correct fit, and call a veterinarian to rule out any health causes.

Finding just the right saddle may require trying on more than a few saddles. My best advice is to support your local saddle stores. They often have a good selection of new and used saddles and should allow you to match the saddle to your horse's back to ensure a good fit. If you purchase off the Internet or through a catalog, make sure that

the saddle can be returned—and remember that there will be shipping costs.

Finally, purchase the very best quality you can afford. Better quality saddles generally fit more horses, hold their value, and will provide you and your horse years of comfort and enjoyment. **PH**

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