



SADDLEFIT

by Ellen Fitzgerald

for women

9 tools to help you find the best fit

When it comes to saddles, there seems to be an unending number of options these days. Trying to find one that fits both you and your horse can be a lengthy process! In this article, we'll focus on how to find a saddle that best fits your body type and shape.

Is there a difference?

Are there saddles that accommodate the physical differences between men and women? The answer is both yes and no, because of the wide spectrum of body types in both sexes. In my years of saddle fitting and speaking with other experts in the field, I have found that what we look like on the outside often

Did you know?

by Dr. Frank Gravlee,
DVM, MS, CNS

To understand how to feed your horse and manage his nutrition, you need to understand his digestive system and how it differs from that of other animals.

Horses are “hay burners”. This means they can digest cellulose fiber and convert it to energy in the pouches of their digestive systems. In the wild, horses have the capacity to produce all the nutrients they need for survival by using water, minerals, and cellulose as energy. Horses use cellulose fiber derived from hay and other roughages as the fuel and building blocks to manufacture most of the essential nutrients that simple stomach animals, such as people, must ingest from other sources.

Unfortunately, this eco-system does not have the capacity to furnish the quantity of nutrients needed to compensate for the added work and stress that the modern horse experiences. We are therefore faced with the nutritional challenge of fortifying this fragile system, without producing nutrient excesses and/or deficiencies.

The solution is to provide hay and/or pasture for roughage, and the necessary basic daily nutrients using a science-based hay balancer, and to control caloric intake utilizing whole oats.



DR. FRANK GRAVLEE GRADUATED FROM AUBURN UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND PRACTICED VETERINARY MEDICINE FOR SEVERAL YEARS

BEFORE ATTENDING GRADUATE SCHOOL AT MIT. DURING A THREE-YEAR RESIDENCY IN NUTRITIONAL PATHOLOGY HE RECEIVED A MASTERS DEGREE IN NUTRITIONAL BIOCHEMISTRY AND INTERMEDIARY METABOLISM. IN 1973, HE FOUNDED LIFE DATA LABS TO DETERMINE EQUINE NUTRITIONAL DEFICIENCIES THROUGH LABORATORY TESTING, AND DEVELOPED INDIVIDUALIZED FEEDING PROGRAMS TO CORRECT THE DEFICIENCIES HE DISCOVERED. AFTER TEN YEARS OF RESEARCH, HE LAUNCHED FARRIER'S FORMULA. WWW.LIFEDATALABS.COM

does not translate to comfort in any prescribed saddle.

Last year I took an equine health class with a fellow who was built like a line-backer. While I am a relatively petite woman who looks like I should be a yoga diva, he appeared muscle-bound and stiff. The reality is that he's a cheerleader in college and a total Gumby, while I can only wave at my toes when I bend over to touch them. It just goes to show that how we look doesn't always reflect the connections and flexibility in our muscles, tendons, and ligaments.

The sexes, generalized

Men and women have differently shaped pelvises. Men's pelvises are narrower and more vertical, so their legs hang straighter. They tend to support themselves horizontally on the saddle on the triangle of the seat bones and pubis. I visualize their vertical shape around the saddle as rectangular, or two right angles as their legs connect into their pelvises. Men will often prefer a saddle with a medium seat and a medium waist.

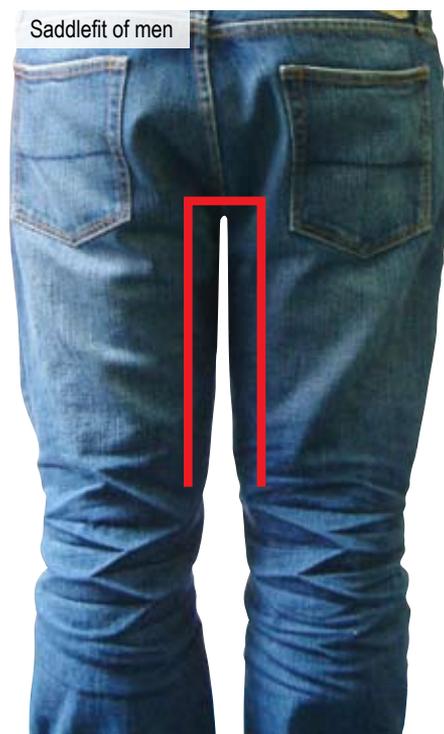
Women have a wider and shallower pelvic shape that necessitates more inside thigh muscle, pulling their legs more toward the center of the body. Although the horizontal support of the pubis and seat bones is similar to a man's, women often use more inside thigh muscle, in addition to the pelvic triangle, for balance. This creates the desire for a broader seat and narrower waist. In women, I see a more triangular vertical support system with the apex at the front of the pelvis being supported on the sides by the inside thigh.

Now think back to my diva and Gumby story. Although pelvic shapes differ between the sexes, the length and flexibility of muscles and connective tissues also dictate our comfort in saddles. So instead of steering you to your perfect saddle, I'll give you nine concepts with which to evaluate your prospects and help you towards the best choice for you.

1. Balance

Your balance is one of the keys to

THE SADDLEFIT OF MEN & WOMEN



comfort for both you and your horse, and the only way to produce effective signals. To illustrate this, try balancing seated on an exercise ball. Once you are balanced with your legs in a comfortable spot, move one of your feet about 3" in any direction, or roll the ball slightly forwards or backwards under you. Now stay in the altered position a few minutes and feel how your body is subtly struggling to stay balanced, and how anything else you try to do is hindered by being out of balance. Without realizing it, we are often struggling with our balance in the saddle and are therefore unable to be comfortable or effective.

2. Seat size



Seat sizes range from about 15" to 19" for English saddles. This measurement is generally taken from the head nail on the pommel (sometimes a saddle company logo is affixed to this) to the center of the cantle. As a rule of thumb, you should have 2" to 4" between the front of your body and the fork at the pommel. Your seat should rest at the base of the cantle but not be pressed against the back of it. If your seat rests too much on the cantle, it will tilt your pelvis forward and hollow your back. According to Karen Borne, Owner of Borné Saddlery, one of the most common mistakes riders make is selecting a seat size that's too small in proportion to their bodies. Even the length of femur (thighbone) can necessitate a larger seat so that your knee stays comfortably on the leg flap. I don't go for vanity seat sizing because seats fit and feel different for each of

us depending on seat waist (sometimes referred to as twist), pommel slope, seat depth, width, and stirrup placement. Hardly anyone will ever measure your saddle seat or check its size marking, so don't get hung up on a number!

3. Waist (or twist)



I like to use the term "waist" because it is the part of the saddle built for the rider over the twist, the twist being built for the horse's comfort. This narrow area of the saddle needs to comfortably support the forward part of your pelvis without interfering with your legs dropping into proper position. Fleshy thighs require space on the saddle so they are not pushed out or forward, creating discomfort or a "chair seat". A narrower waist can allow this needed space, and the inside of the leg can help support the pubis. Women with slim thighs often prefer medium waisted saddles, because there is broader support for the front of their pelvis and yet their legs hang into position.

4. Pommel slope

Saddles have differing slopes from the base of the cantle up to the pommel. This will affect where the center or balance point is on the saddle. Make sure the slope does not push your balance point back too far, thus interfering with the forward portion of your pelvis. If a rise to the pommel encourages you to tilt your pelvis back, you will be out

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of balance. If the pommel gets in the way when you post the trot, it is not going to work for your build.



The balance point must be evaluated in relationship to the stirrup bars and knee or thigh blocks. If the center of the seat is too forward, you will feel that your legs are locked in by the knee rolls or stirrup placement. A balance point too far back will create a situation in which you have little to no contact with knee rolls, or the stirrups will bring your legs forwards into a chair seat.

5. Leg rolls and blocks



Knee and thigh block designs on English saddles have expanded greatly in recent years. There are now many English saddles that have exterior (on the top side of the leg flap) knee and thigh

blocks. One of the advantages to exterior blocks is that it reduces the bulk directly under the leg. This aids both expert riders, and riders who are more restricted in lateral hip joint mobility. In some cases, exterior blocks create instability for a more amateur rider because they don't have the security of the roll or block that has a traditional overlying leg flap slightly cradling their lower leg.

The traditional placement of blocks and rolls is under the leg flap, mounted on, or built into the sweat flap (the flap closest to the horse). It is less restrictive to leg and forward hip movement and adds sometimes desired security under the leg.

HINT

Some saddle companies offer Velcro attached leg blocks, so you can place them for optimal comfort and effectiveness.

Whether you are investigating saddles with exterior blocks or traditional rolls, be aware of the placement, angle and length of the blocks or rolls. If they are restricting your leg, they can create a pivot point and actually throw off your seat position or push you onto the cantle. If your leg is not being supported by the blocks or rolls, it will have a tendency to constantly "search" for it, resulting in instability. Again, decide on what feels best for you and try not to buy into the latest craze. Your body is unique, and you will find you are most comfortable and effective with the style that suits you.

6. Stirrup placement

A growing number of English saddles are equipped with adjustable stirrup bars that allow you to move the stirrup forward or back. Return to the balance ball exercise and recall how moving the ball forward or backward from your balanced position created body tension. Try to be aware of your shoulder/hip/



heel alignment when you sit on a prospective saddle on your horse. Your ear, shoulder, hip and heel should line up vertically. A change in the stirrup bar setting, or a saddle with correct stirrup bar placement for your body, can make a large improvement.

7. Seat depth



The depth of a seat can give a rider security, or restrict her mobility. Dressage style English saddles generally have deeper seats, while close contact and all purpose saddles have more open seats. Within all these disciplines, expert riders often prefer more open seats because they have developed excellent control and therefore feel less restricted in such a seat. Amateur riders like the security of the deeper seat.

HINT

Don't be surprised to find that a deeper seat often necessitates a larger seat size.

8. Seat width



You need to consider three aspects of the broad part of the seat width: the actual width, the slope from the center to the edges, and the length. Susan Fletcher-Baker, a Qualified Master Saddler who hand-makes saddles, finds that women's seat bones are fairly close to the

center of their bodies and are easily supported. She emphasizes that the saddle also needs to bear the inside thigh muscles and the fleshier part of a woman's seat. If the saddle falls off too quickly toward the sides, and all the rider's weight is supported only by the seat bones, she will experience fatigue and pain. If the wide part of the seat extends too far forward, it can force the rider into a chair seat. Look for the seat you feel will comfortably support you but also allow you to sit correctly.

9. Manufacturers

Manufacturers' saddles generally don't fit all builds of horse. Similarly, their seat styles may or may not work for you. Most saddle companies try to vary seat styles within their lines, so if you find a saddle that fits your horse but makes you feel uncomfortable, check to see if there is another model with a similar tree and better seat for you. Some manufacturers are now making saddles specifically designed for women. Because of the great variation among women's body types, however, these may or may not feel right for you. If you don't find the best fit for you at one company, move on. There are many excellent quality manufacturers and one will have the right saddle for you and your equine partner.

Finding the right saddle for you and your horse can be a challenge. Try not to get caught up in the saddle de jour, and take the time to evaluate your options. Just as you must kiss a lot of frogs before you find Prince Charming, you must also try as many saddles as you can before making your decision. It will make all the difference to your riding. ©

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