



IF THE SADDLE FITS

Just because you purchased a custom saddle for your horse doesn't mean it will fit perfectly forever. Here's how to know when it's time to have that saddle checked!

BY ELLEN FITZGERALD

It has been almost a year since I first started using a brand new saddle custom made for my horse. Does it still fit? The answer in my case is yes, because I have already tweaked it a few times. As a professional saddle fitter, I am aware of the changes in my horse's build as we progress in training, go through seasonal weight and fitness fluctuations, and experience setbacks related to health and soundness. In my situation, my mare changed careers from hunter/jumper to dressage and is developing new muscles.

Signs of change

If you asked your local haberdasher to make you a custom suit that fit "just right", there's a very good chance that

suit wouldn't fit you quite the same over time. Maybe you had it made during the summer when you were slimmer, but now it's the holiday season and you've put on a few pounds. Horses experience similar body changes that we may or may not notice. The only difference between us and our horses is that we can choose not to wear the suit – and the suit is not supporting 100 or more pounds of force.

So how do you know if your saddle still fits? Here are some indicators that something has changed:

- Your saddle's pommel is sitting too close to your horse's withers, or it all of a sudden seems high.

Trimmers and shoers can tell a great deal about how your horse is growing and changing by how he is wearing his hooves and shoes.

- The billet holes you use have changed when you girth up.
- You feel you are being pitched forward, or your trainer is now saying you need to bring your legs more underneath you when this was never a problem before.
- There are bumps that look like bug bites or a rash at the edge of or behind your horse's scapula, where the points of the saddle rest, or under the seat.
- Your horse is acting a little cranky when you saddle up, yet he never used to.
- When you place your saddle on your horse's back without a pad:
 - There's a gap between the saddle and his back under the seat area of the saddle. This indicates "bridging".
 - If you place one hand on the cantle and one on the pommel and alternately press down, you notice the saddle is actually "rocking".

Moving forward

The good news is that these changes indicate your horse may be developing better fitness and corresponding muscle tone. Whether this is actually the case, or whether your horse has been ill, lame, or has been idle for awhile with no training, the saddle will need to be re-evaluated for fit to allow the next step up in development or recovery. An ill-fitting saddle can undo any efforts to move forward, so veterinarians who specialize in saddle impact on horse health recommend a professional saddle evaluation every six months. As a rider, you can begin to recognize changes that might be a red flag to call in a saddle fitter before your horse's regular checkup.

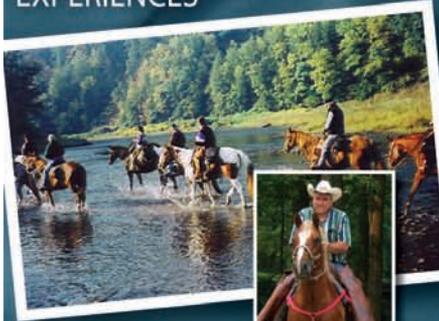
Professional help

Today, we have plenty of ways to monitor a horse's health. We invite professionals in on a regular basis to work on our horses – trainers, trimmers, farriers, veterinarians and body workers can all be enlisted in helping you track changes. You see your horse almost every day and it is sometimes difficult to notice gradual changes, but these professionals usually come to visit your horse at spaced intervals and are more apt to notice something different.

Trainers move you and your horse towards a goal. They know muscles will be changing to attain that goal, so ask them periodically if they are seeing different muscling. If you don't have your own weight tape, ask your veterinarian to tape your horse twice a year and evaluate the horse using the universal Henneke body condition score. Keep track of that information.

Trimmers and shoers can tell a great deal about how your horse is growing and changing by how he is wearing his hooves and shoes. Speak with them about

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Above: These two photos show that the horse has outgrown this tree. Notice how it is too high when you view it from the side and there is too much room over the withers when viewed from the front. The rider's posture will be forced into a "chair seat" if she rides on this saddle.



Above: When a horse's back is lifted by wiggling your fingers on the belly at the center girth line, the saddle should not lift off the back under the cantle as this one does.

any changes they have noticed and if they have an idea as to the cause.

Chiropractors and massage therapists, meanwhile, literally have their hands on your horse and can feel changes or problem spots that might relate to saddle fit.

Tracking changes

If you are not present when these professionals work with your horse, you can do a few things to evaluate changes for yourself:

- 1 Place the saddle on your horse with no pad.
- 2 Pull out your mobile phone or camera and snap a few photos from the ¾-front view (looking down the channel of the saddle from just off to the side), the sides (horse on level ground), and the back (using care and discretion). These are always nice so you have a record of your horse from year to year.
- 3 Compare these and similar photos taken every six months, or after any known event that may have impacted your horse.
- 4 Purchase a weight tape, tape your horse monthly and record the results. Look for accumulating weight gain or loss since you last had a professional evaluate your saddle.

The bottom line is that changes in your horse's body translate directly to a different saddle fit. So what's the next step? Call a saddle fitter! The solution may be as simple as tweaking the padding or changing the flocking if it is a wool-flocked saddle. Some saddles have changeable gullet systems or a tree that can be adjusted. If things have shifted enough, you may need a new saddle.

I'm pretty sure my mission on this Earth is to ease riders into the idea of changing saddles as often as their horses need it. Saddles are not cars – they should not be used until they disintegrate. Instead, think about saddles as you would your own shoes – change them when they become uncomfortable for you or your horse. 

ELLEN FITZGERALD IS AN INDEPENDENT SADDLE FITTER IN COLORADO. HER COMPANY, SADDLEHANDS, NEITHER SELLS SADDLES NOR REPRESENTS ANY SADDLE COMPANY SO THAT SHE MAY GIVE CLIENTS SADDLE EVALUATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS WITHOUT BIAS. ELLEN WORKS WITH INDIVIDUAL CLIENTS AND PRESENTS SADDLE FITTING CLINICS IN NORTH AMERICA. SHE EVALUATES ALL ENGLISH, WESTERN AND AUSTRALIAN SADDLES AND WORKS ON MOST ENGLISH SADDLES TO ADJUST OR REFLOCK. SADDLEHANDS.COM, 303-903-1488