

DIY Saddle and Accessories Selection and Evaluation

We all know the excitement of looking forward to a wonderful ride on our horse, then the disappointment that hits when we walk up to our horse with our saddle and they pin their ears, snap their teeth and resent the saddling and girthing process.

The three part series will give you many of the tools needed to assess all of the steps you take prior to saddling, how to evaluate; your horse's stable management and body, your saddle, your riding position and taking a look at how they all work together or against each other during a ride. This will not train you to become a saddle fitter just giving you more ability to really see how you may be able to improve your horse's attitude, comfort and willingness to work.

Part I

It is important to look at the health, behavior and soundness of the horse as many little details that add up to a much bigger picture. This means that as you prepare your horse for a ride the horse's body language can always reveal a great deal about your horse's outlook on his day to day routine and his physical comfort. Grooming your horse is one of the ways of connecting with your horse and the day to day changes that happen with his body. Does he enjoy the grooming? Or is he cranky, the belly of the sensitive horse should be excluded. If his behavior changes look for a cause; is there a change in his muscling, is there a localized soreness, is he sore under the saddle position or someplace else?

We are not veterinarians, but every good horseman should learn to palpate your horse's back, it will come in handy, but this is not something you do every day or the horse will become over sensitized. Please no poking, finger nails or pointy things, consider your own back and someone prodding you with a sharp object, we are not trying to agitate the horse and make them reactive. The horse will give you clear indicators that they are uncomfortable. Using the pads of your index, middle and ring finger with firm even pressure stroke with the hair, behind the shoulder blade from the top of the scapula around the back where it will come in contact with the front of the saddle. Bruising can occur in this area when the saddle is not stable. To make sure that the spine is not affected place the thumb on one side of the spine the index finger on the spine and your middle finger on the other side of the spine, palpate from the withers to the back of the rib cage. In the crevice of the spine you will find the heads of the dorsal process (very top of the spine) will have a consistent spacing, gently evaluating for swelling in between each knob of the spine or pain on either side of the spine.

The next is area to palpate is along the spine and beneath the saddle there is a wide strip of muscle that runs parallel to the spine called the longissimus dorsi. After you palpate the first three finger width from the spine, move down to the next width of three fingers and repeat the process checking the length and width of the saddle. This band of muscle is the main muscle that is within the saddle area, we are looking for the consistency of the rebound and elasticity of that muscle and tissue. Does his back feel elastic and rebound well after you stroke the muscle or is hard then soft, do you fall into a hole and does he anticipate your pressure before you get there by hollowing his body? Sometimes you will even see the muscles spasm before or after you stroke the horse's back. Is the overall musculature looking as though it is healthy or is he doughy with lots of fat pads and marbled looking? Always keep your eye on the changes in their body it can be an easy indicator of metabolic concerns. Severe reactions to your palpation or any remarkable changes in their body need to be addressed by a veterinarian. You are your horse's first line of defense against problems with their body, so always be on alert.

As you are examining your horse's body you are also evaluating lumps, bumps, lesions any of these located under the saddle pad, saddle or girth areas are cause for concern. Be careful of taking your pads and girths between horses if any skin problems are present, some skin concerns can be very contagious.

Saddle pads come in all fabrics, density and sizes. Keep it simple; keep it clean, keep it natural materials, cotton, wool, sheepskin and flannel to name some of the customary. If choosing a sheepskin pad select a pad with an open channel down the center and no roll of wool around the back, the pad may shrink and end up under the saddle creating fitting problems and pressure points. A cotton square pad with more density will serve you well, it will not wrinkle up or move around which helps a great deal in keeping the area under the saddle comfortable. Any pad that you use must extend out beyond the edges of your saddle, otherwise any pad edge that ends up under the saddle will be a pressure point which could cause discomfort or rub the hair off and even create a raw spot.

Be consistent with your padding system, simple is always better but I am not opposed to a combination of pads as long as they fit well, the saddle is fitted with that specific padding system and that system is in place with every ride. For instance many of my professional riders like to use a cotton contoured pad for the base pad and a half fleece pad for the pad next to the saddle. We always establish the fit the saddle with these pads in place.

The pad that is directly against the horse needs to have a higher cut in the fabric of the pommel area so that it will not bind against the withers as the horse starts to move. Speaking of pads and movement I had a rider who was concerned about a

mark across the horses back behind the saddle and thought that it was the saddle creating the problem. Once we started to evaluate what was happening we discovered that all of the pads that she owned had been washed in hot water and dried had shrunk so much they started moving back and forth to act like a cord on his back and he now had a very angry red uncomfortable stripe across his back. This is just an illustration of some of the things that can be prevented if you keep an eye on the changes that are occurring with your horse or equipment. It is also a reminder to wash your pads in cold water and hang to dry so that the pads continue to fit your saddle and stay the same size and shape that you purchased.

The girth may have to be selected based on your horse's conformation. Each horse is designed a bit differently through the girth pocket area; that narrow flat area behind the elbow before the belly curves wider. These body types require some more consideration as to what girth will be the most successful and how you position all of your equipment during tacking.

We can actually categorize some breeds or body types; for example many Arabian's will have a girth pocket that will be narrow and right behind their elbow. Another group that can have a similar concern is the very uphill Warmblood with their neck coming right out of the top of their withers; often the Warmblood's can have a longer scapula as well as the smaller girth pocket. The set back shoulder blade will require the saddle to be placed further back; this will sometimes create a situation where the billets will slant slightly forward. A properly fitted saddle will not have any difficulty staying in place with the billets in this position.

When recommending a girth I usually like to recommend a soft leather contoured girth with roller buckles that has curves at the elbows, this provides more room for the elbows and skin to be free of friction. The roller buckles will allow for a smoother tightening of the girth and will save your billets from wear. I also point out for even pressure the girth should be constructed with an elastic on both sides that is not too stretchy. Overly stretchy elastic creates a great deal of movement and will make your saddle less stable as well.

The short dressage girth is not meant to be so long that the buckles are up under your flap or interfering with your leg. When using the long billets we find that about one third of the way up the billets will usually put the girth in a comfortable spot for most horses and riders, or evaluate where the contours fit when considering the elbow movement.

Horse's with a smaller girth pocket may be predisposed to girth sores or galling because of the elbow pushing the extra skin up against the front of the girth. A good bet for those very small girth pockets is a narrow width girth, still with elastic on both sides and roller buckles. And sometimes, I have found that the only material that slides around easily and will not gall with friction is a man made vinyl like girth.

It used to be with most horses we could say the rule of thumb is one hands width behind the elbow to the front of the girth. Try to place the girth as far back from the elbow as is achievable this will help to give as much freedom of movement as possible. To help their horse many people have a routine of saddling the horse up, tightening the girth and then prior to mounting they will pull the horse's front legs forward to both stretch the shoulders and to stretch the skin out from under the girth. Try this and notice how much more skin you end up with in front of the girth just waiting for the girth to rub. If you would like to stretch your horse please consider doing this before you saddle the horse or at least prior to tightening the girth.

It is hard to imagine that so much time could be spent discussing your girth or the girthing process, but you can not imagine how many horses I see with galls and girthy. It makes me cringe every time I see a rider tighten the horse's girth as tight as they can in the cross ties. I feel that this is a very important piece of your horse management and your horsemanship skills that is easy to evaluate and improve.

After a meticulous grooming, carefully placing your pads and saddling your horse, now comes the most critical part of making your horse comfortable, the girthing process. I often start a fitting with an unhappy and overly sensitive horse, usually by the end of the fitting all of the angry behavior dissipates because I have given him the confidence that I will be carefully placing the saddle on his back and tightening his girth in a very gentle and thoughtful way. I have seen more people bucked off after tightening the horse at the mounting block and climbing aboard, some horses will tolerate it and many will not. Tighten the girth just tight enough to keep the saddle in place, this can vary from horse to horse, then walk the horse forward tightening first on one side then the other with walk steps in between, back and forth until tight, make certain that you have enough distance to walk to have the horse relaxed before you mount. This method of girthing is the perfect illustration of why the roller buckle girth is helpful to aid with smooth and easy girthing.

Part II

This series will give you tools to assess the steps prior to saddling, how to evaluate your horse's stable management and body, your saddle, your riding position and a look at how they all work together. Last month we covered how to examine your horse's body and saddle pads.

The girth may have to be selected based on your horse's conformation. Each horse is designed a bit differently through the girth pocket area, that narrow flat area behind the elbow before the belly curves wider. These body types require some consideration as to what girth will be the most successful and how you position your equipment during tacking.

We can categorize some breeds or body types. For example many Arabians will have a girth pocket that will be narrow and right behind their elbows. Another group that can have a similar concern is the very uphill Warmblood with its neck coming right out of the top of its withers. Often warmbloods can have a longer scapula as well as the smaller girth pocket. The set back shoulder blade will require the saddle to be placed further back. This will sometimes create a situation where the billets will slant slightly forward. A properly fitted saddle will not have any difficulty staying in place with the billets in this position.

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The short dressage girth is not meant to be so long that the buckles are up under your flap or interfere with your leg. About one third of the way up the billets is usually a comfortable spot for most horses and riders. Evaluate where the contours fit when considering the elbow movement.

Horses with a smaller girth pocket may be predisposed to girth sores or galling because of the elbow pushing the extra skin against the front of the girth. A good bet for those very small girth pockets is a narrow width girth, still with elastic on both sides and roller buckles. And sometimes, the only material that slides easily and will not gall with friction is a man-made vinyl-like girth.

The general rule of thumb is placing the girth one hands-width behind the elbow to the front of the girth. Try to place it as far back from the elbow as is achievable. Give your horse as much freedom of movement as possible.

To help their horse, many people will saddle the horse up, tighten the girth and prior to mounting will pull the horse's front legs forward to stretch the shoulders and stretch the skin out from under the girth. Notice how much more skin you end up with in front of the girth just waiting for the girth to rub. If you would like to stretch your horse, do it before you saddle the horse or at least prior to tightening the girth.

I see many horses with galls and girthy. Don't tighten the horse's girth as tight as you can in the cross-ties. It is an important part of horse management and horsemanship skill that is easy to evaluate and improve. I have seen some people bucked off after tightening the horse at the mounting block and climbing aboard. Some horses will tolerate it, but many will not.

After a meticulous grooming, carefully place your pads and saddle your horse. The most critical part of making your horse comfortable is girthing.

Tighten the girth just tight enough to keep the saddle in place. This varies from horse to horse. Walk to horse forward, tightening first on one side then the other, walking a few steps in between. Walk back and forth until the girth is tight, making certain that you have walked far enough that your horse is relaxed before you mount. This method of girthing illustrates why the roller buckle girth is helpful to aid with smooth and easy girthing.

Part III

Now that we have discussed all of the preparation for the saddling process we will take a good solid look at your saddle for a basic safety check. The most obvious place that you will notice wear is on the stirrup leathers stitching and the billet straps. After the saddle is placed on the horse, the billets are easily observed because the straps are in front of you and you must handle them to tighten the girth, it is also a reminder about using your roller buckle girths to ease the wear and tear, increase their longevity and to save the finish of the billet. Is the billet leather worn, cracked or torn, are the stitches loose or missing? You must pick up the flap to see where the stitching attaches and examine the stitching on your stirrup leathers carefully.

The tree of the saddle is its structure so we will periodically check the tree for integrity and soundness. Position the cantle across the front of your hips place your hands evenly on each side of the pommel and pull evenly front to back, listen for creaking, look for large uneven creases across the leather seat and excessive bending through the seat area. If you discover any of these challenges with your tree have it checked out by a professional. If the tree is not sound and flexes irregularly imagine the uneven pressure created on your horses back from you and your horse's asymmetrical and unlevel body and riding.

We want to do a quick evaluation to make sure that the saddle fits properly on the horse; approximately three fingers of clearance from the top of the withers to the bottom of the pommel is adequate, the cantle is always higher than the pommel how much higher is based on the depth of the seat of the saddle. The lowest point of the seat will match the lowest point on the horse and it will place the rider in a balanced position; their ear, shoulder, hip and heel alignment.

The tree can be a curvier tree; flatter with many variations of shapes in between, the shape of the tree affects the fit for the horse and the feel for the rider. When testing the fit of the tree and panel on the horse run your hand the length of the panel knuckles toward the saddle, there should be a consistent contact the length of the panel. You must look for the same consistent pressure as you run your hand down the front of the tree; it should sit behind the horses shoulder with some easement and run parallel to your horse's body with even pressure to the end of the tree point.

Attached to the tree on the bottom is the panel, which is the piece of leather/ the length of the bottom of the saddle that is against the horses back. Our recommendation is to purchase a saddle with a wool panel, because it is soft, comfortable and re-shapeable as the horse's body changes. If the saddle is foam it is not readily adjustable, so what you have for the shape of the panel is what you are stuck with. This part of the saddle can make or break your horse's back stability during work. Your wool flocked saddle should be adjusted regularly depending upon how much the saddle is ridden and the advancement of your horse's musculature. A very angular well worked horse or a young horse with a rapidly changing body may need fine-tuning every three months, the average horse every six months and for the horse that is ridden less frequently annual adjustments may be enough. Flocking needs will become the most obvious through changes in your horse's behavior; you will struggle with your balance, friction marks on the horse's body or uneven dirt patterns on your saddle pad start to show up.

When you evaluate the appearance of the panel you are looking for consistency in density and a surface that does not have many high points and low points, some of these irregularities will be easily addressed with reflocking. You want the bottom of the saddle to follow the contour of the horses back both for balance so that you will sit over the top of your leg and contact laterally and longitudinal for comfort and stability. The caution here is if the horse's back changes much when the horse moves it will affect the fit and comfort of the saddle.

If the horse has a significant curve to their back and you fill in that curve, your horse will try to lift their back but may be blocked by the curve in the tree. They will become uncomfortable and may refuse to go forward because if their back becomes a flatter surface the saddle will become like a rocking chair on a flat surface. The saddle will become unstable, creating a rocking motion causing a bumping and soreness at the back of the shoulder and the pivot point of the rock will be bruised and become a point where the horse will experience muscle loss.

The opposite can occur when the tree is too flat for a back you will discover that the saddle doesn't have any contact under the rest of the panel except in the front and in the back is called bridging.

Once again this article will not make you into a saddle fitter but it may assist you when you do have a fitter come out and no matter what this outline will help to make you a more aware horseman who is looking out for their horses well being. It offers you another tool for when your horse is resistant – maybe it is time to evaluate your saddle.