

Dressage Today Magazine Questions for Qualified Saddler Debbie Witty:

- 1. *What is the most common mistake(s) you see riders (especially those new to dressage) making when they choose a dressage saddle for their horse? For themselves?***

The most common mistake I see is that riders choose a saddle with improper balance, so that proper alignment; the ear shoulder, hip and heel, is not attainable. This lack of balance can be created by a number of things: the saddle is too small for the rider so they sit too much on the cantle causing them to sit behind their leg. This chair seat positioning will also be seen when the saddle is sitting cantle low, either the pommel is too high because the saddle is too narrow or there is not significant panel under the cantle to support the rider for the correct alignment. We will also find difficulty creating the proper seat if the saddle is riding pommel low, too close to the horses withers, or the cantle is too high pushing the rider forward often forcing the rider to break at the front of the hip, bringing their shoulders forward and their leg compensates by ending up behind the rider. All scenarios with improper balance generate difficulties with maintaining stability for the rider's position, as well as this imbalance and localized pressure creates unsoundness in the horses back.

- 2. *What is the most unusual, perplexing or funny problem you've ever come across when fitting a saddle to a dressage horse? Give details about the horse, his back, the rider, etc. How did you solve it?***

Several years ago I met a very competent adult amateur rider and her 16-year-old warmblood gelding. The horse had been on stall rest for 30 days with hand walking for an additional 60 days the horse was just being started back to work and he had lost significant muscle so that his saddle was not fitting and his back was sore due to the poor fit of the saddle. It was bridging so significantly that you could, at the lowest part of his back, stack two of your hands with your palms down between the horses back and the bottom of the panel. The front of the saddle fit well as did the back, but the pressure was not being distributed evenly through the length of the panel because there was no contact at all in the middle, so the localized pressure to the front and back of the hollow was crushing him. I built a shim (inserted between the saddle pad and bottom of the saddles panel) with a rubberized material six layers deep to fill in the gaping beveling the sides so that it would blend well to the front and back where the contact was. We would meet every few months and try taking out a piece of shim to see if the contact had improved during work. With a strong rehab program along with good riding we were able keep the horse totally comfortable; we eventually removed all of

the shims and returned to a normal pad.

3. ***What new innovations do you see coming soon in saddle design or technology?***

I believe that the technology for the future that will have the greatest affect on the saddle industry will come from outside the saddle manufacturing. Routine diagnostic and manual testing by educated saddle technicians to evaluate the fit of the saddle will be a prevalent method of the future.

4. ***What about this work gives you the greatest pleasure?***

As a saddle fitter we have the great fortune to come in contact with such a varying horse community. In the same day we can be at a grand training facility and with a back yard beginning dressage rider, the rewards are the same. I love opening the rider's eyes to the possibilities that a good saddle a regular maintenance can make. I is very rewarding when the rider can feel a dramatic change in their effectiveness with their seat because of the saddle and the sense of accomplishment that I feel when the horse gives an immediate and positive response with more swing and relaxation in his way of going. I love being able educate the clients and show them how an educated saddle fitter can make a difference!