

Saddle Fit and Getting Ready for Spring! Quick Review of the 9 points of Saddle Fit

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If you or your horse have been somewhat inactive over the winter months, you will need to ensure that the saddle is fitted properly to allow him comfort and freedom to muscle up again when you begin to ride. As we head into spring, it's time to put our thoughts into ensuring that all of our tack and equipment will work. While it can take four weeks for a muscle to build up with consistent training, it takes only one week for the muscle to regain its original shape (which is negative development). Thus, even if you have taken just a few weeks off from riding, you will find that your saddle may not fit the way it did and the way it should.

A quick diagnostic can be done using our 9 points of saddle fit evaluation (with videos available to show you how at our YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/c/schleesesaddlery) Below are very brief points to do a preliminary assessment of your own saddle fit – recognizing that perhaps you may actually be sharing both horse and/or saddle with other riders (a topic I will go into next time in more detail!) But even so, you want to make sure that you have the most positive pairing available to you.

1. Saddle Balance

A saddle too high in the pommel and too low in the cantle causes pressure on the horse's back. It will be very difficult for your horse to engage his back because too much of your weight is on his last 2 floating ribs.

If your saddle is too low in the front it will pinch into the horse's shoulder – which is very restrictive for your horse. Your saddle is too high in the back so your leg goes forward and you fall into a chair seat to balance which can strain the discs in your lower back. It should sit so that the pommel and cantle are even. [Watch Video](#)

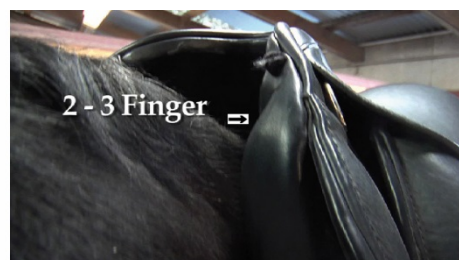


This dressage saddle shows where the center of balance is.

2. Wither Clearance

The saddle should have 2-3 fingers clearance on the top and around the side of the withers. The saddle must have an opening (clearance) on the sides of his withers to accommodate the shoulder rotation upwards and backwards during movement.

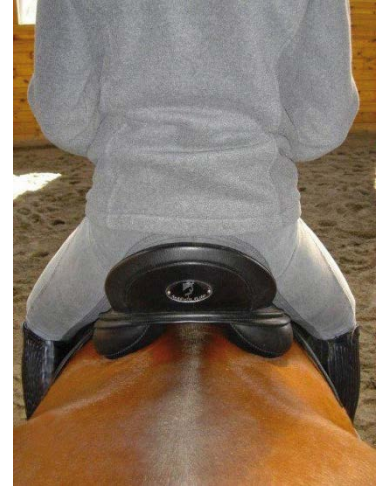
A horse whose saddle pinches his withers may be reluctant to go forward. Other more extreme signs of insufficient wither clearance are patches of white hairs (not scattered individual white hairs) or sores on the top or on one or both sides of the withers. [Watch Video](#)



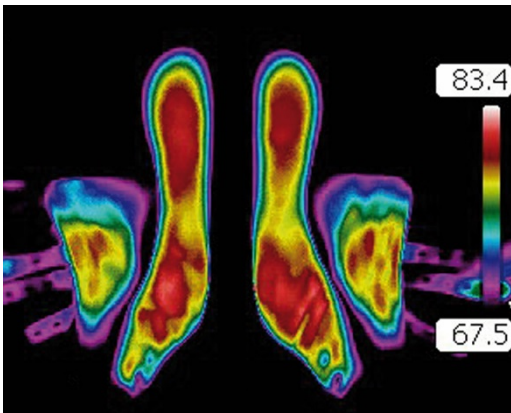
The distance between the top of the withers and the sides of the withers should be 2-3 fingers all around.

3. [Channel/Gullet Width](#)

A saddle with a channel or gullet that is too narrow or too wide can cause permanent damage to your horse's back. The width of each horse's spine will determine how wide his saddle's gullet must be, and it must be the same throughout the entire length of the saddle. [Watch Video](#)



This saddle has a wide gullet channel with good distribution of the rider's weight on the horse's saddle support area.



This thermographic image shows a saddle with panels that bridge front to back, resulting in greater pressure at the pommel and cantle areas.

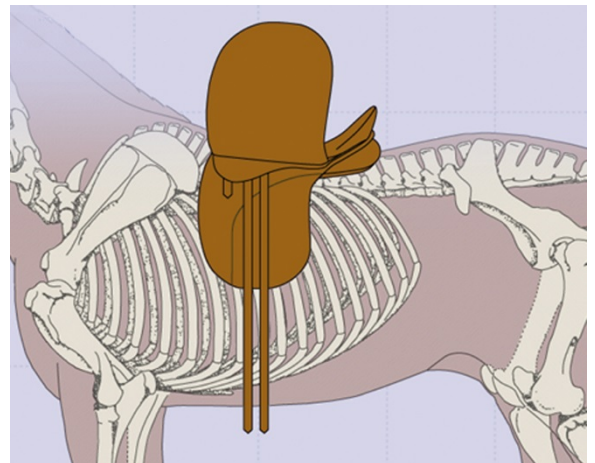
4. [Full Panel Contact](#)

Ensure that your saddle's panels make even contact with your horse's back all the way down to distribute the rider's weight over an area that equals approximately 220 square inches and ends at the last rib. Ensure that it doesn't bridge or rocks (contact only in the middle.) [Watch Video](#)

5. [Billet Alignment](#)

Billets should hang perpendicular to the ground in the girth area. If the billets hang too far back, gravity will pull the billets (and the saddle) forward into the girth area. The girth will always find its position at the narrowest point of the rib cage, driving the saddle forward onto your horse's shoulders.

If the billets hang too far forward into your horse's elbow area, they may make him sore in the elbows. Gravity will drag them (and the girth and saddle along with them) back into the girth area. There will now be too much pressure on the panels at the rear of the saddle. [Watch Video](#)



This saddle is positioned behind the shoulder but a) is too long for the horse's back as it extends past the 18th thoracic vertebra and b) the billets are too far back and will pull the saddle onto the shoulder in motion.

6. [Saddle Length](#)

The length of the saddle support area will determine how long the panels must be.

The saddle must sit behind the shoulder. A saddle that is too long often will get driven forward into the shoulder. The saddle cannot extend past the last floating rib at the 18th thoracic vertebra.

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This saddle clearly is too long for this horse as it sits and puts pressure beyond the last floating rib as drawn in yellow on the horse. The yellow line drawn on the saddle's panel indicates a more suitable length of panel for this horse.

7. [Saddle Straightness](#)

Straightness means that the center of the saddle is in alignment with your horse's spine. Horses are by nature uneven. Most horses have a left shoulder that is larger and more developed than their right shoulder. The larger shoulder kicks the saddle over to the other side during motion.

A rider who sits unevenly due can compress the stuffing more on one side of the saddle, and drag it over to that side. [Watch Video](#)



This rider is sitting on a saddle which has shifted to the right - presumably having been moved by the larger left shoulder during movement. Photo courtesy Dr. Joanna Robson, DVM.

8. [Tree Angle](#)

The angle of the tree (at the tree points for the gullet plate) must be adjusted to match the angle of the horse's shoulder. As the horse moves, his shoulder rotates upward and backwards. Check if the angle of the piping on the saddle matches the angle of your horse's shoulder. If it does, the angle of your saddle's tree is correctly adjusted for your horse. [Watch Video](#)



The angle of this saddle is correct as it is the same as the shoulder angle of the horse.

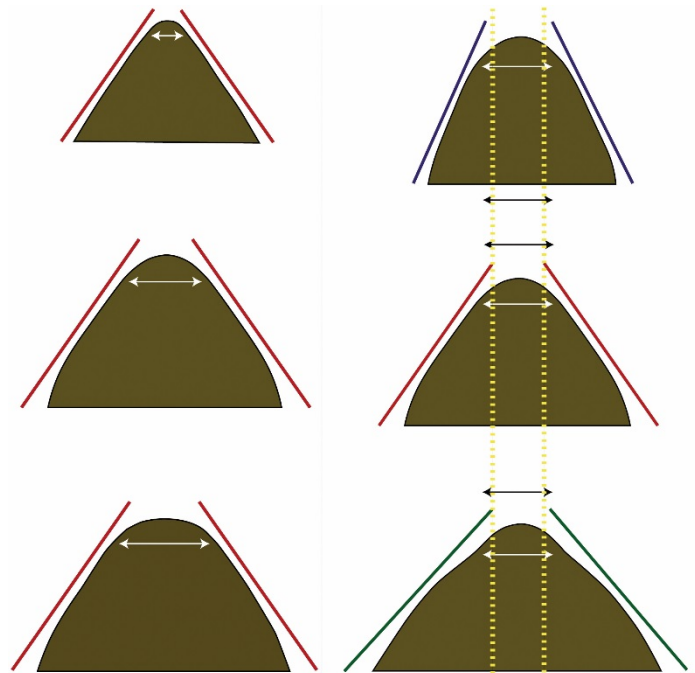
9. [Tree Width](#)

The tree width at the gullet plate must be wide enough for the horse's shoulders to rotate freely under the tree.

If the tree width is too wide, the entire saddle may rock or slip from side to side when it's being ridden, or the back half of the saddle may twist to one side or the other.

Tree width and tree angle need to be adjusted together. Adding flocking to or removing flocking from the vertical panels of the saddle will not solve the problem – it is the gullet plate that needs to be adjusted. Some of the self-adjustable gullet plates will accommodate angle adjustment, but will not allow width adjustment (over the wither area).

[Watch Video](#)



The three diagrams on the left illustrate identical tree angles with different tree widths; the three on the right illustrate identical tree widths with different tree angles (such as can be effected with the 'self-adjusting' trees of various companies – but changing angle without changing width is not always a good thing).

Hopefully these basic tips will help you get ensure your horse has the freedom to perform at its potential. When in doubt – call a professional!