

Saddle Fit and Rider Balance

By Jochen Schleese, MDS, CSFT, CSE

©2018 Saddleftit 4 Life ® All Rights Reserved



The question has been asked whether there are additional saddle fitting considerations when working with an unbalanced rider. I think that the answer to this is rather an obvious one – any time a rider is unbalanced it absolutely either a) affects the fit of the saddle or b) is actually caused by the fit of the saddle. In order to determine the true cause/effect relationship the easiest thing is first to determine whether the saddle fits properly, because speaking from experience often times a rider is thrown out of balance if the saddle shifts during riding, or if the saddle is gender inappropriate. So these considerations are relatively easy to determine and eliminate or determine and fix.

A saddle often shifts or moves during riding because it simply has not been fitted properly to the horse. Most often it is the tree angle and tree width which is the culprit; either allowing the saddle to slide forward over the shoulder during movement, or backwards as the shoulder(s) hit the tree points during movement, or shift to one side because the saddle has not been fitted to accommodate the natural crookedness of the horse.

A saddle may seem to fit the horse 'perfectly' as long as he is standing still in the crossties. However, once the rider sits on top, the issues begin to present themselves. What we see most often is the larger shoulder (usually the left) causes the saddle to shift right during movement, which not only causes the rider to shift position to compensate, but can actually result in all sorts of physiological issues for the horse. It is important for your saddle fit expert to conduct both a static and a dynamic fit analysis.

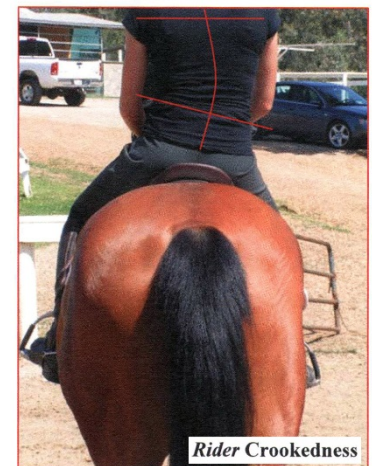
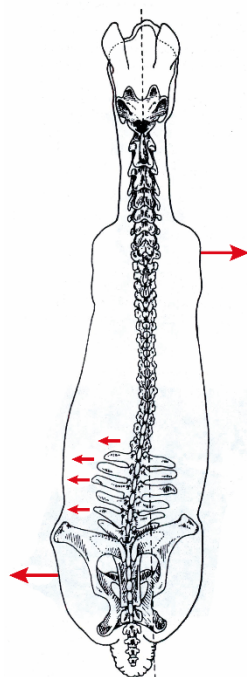


Photo courtesy of Dr. Joanna Robson, DVM



Particularly the shape and position of the gullet plate – the stiffest and most stable part of the saddle – needs to be fitted in both width and angle to accommodate this crookedness in the horse's conformation. Flocking, shimming, or pads cannot alter its fit – simple physics means that the larger shoulder will displace the saddle to the smaller side. Farther down the horse's back then the saddle will actually put pressure on the opposite side of the spinal column – because it no longer lies within the proper position of the saddle support area – which keeps the spinal vertebrae clear of the panel. The saddle, which is being displaced along its horizontal axis, will cause the rider to shift to the right as well – and cause her to counteract by shifting her weight to the left. She will now find little support from the saddle under her left gluteus muscle, resulting in further collapse to the left. Adding more pressure to the saddle, causing even more shift to the right. Sound familiar?

There are also numerous 'gender appropriate'

One of the most common reasons for a horse indicating a subluxation in the spine or SI joint occurs because the gullet plate has not been fitted to accommodate the larger shoulder (in this case, the left). This shifts the saddle to the right, puts excess pressure on the back of the left panel along the left side of the spine, which the horse further compensates for by deviating through the right shoulder. Image courtesy of Peter C. Goody (used with permission).

considerations (women should ride in saddles made for women) but this would entail a completely different discussion. Suffice it to say – if the rider is not comfortable in the saddle, this discomfort will absolutely translate down to the horse through the saddle and hinder it in various ways – up to and including less than optimal performance, pain, and possible long-term symptomatic lameness(es).

If the rider is herself physiologically out of balance (due to past hip injuries, for example – or for any number of reasons) this can be addressed with a custom made saddle which will accommodate this anatomical asymmetry, or can perhaps actually be temporarily alleviated with a saddle pad. The key here is ‘temporarily’ – a pad should never be used to fix a saddle fit issue, and indeed – if the saddle is already too tight for the horse on one side, resulting in the actions discussed above, it would be like putting another pair of socks on when the shoes are already too tight.

I may be biased but my years of experience in seeing over 150,000 horses with my staff I always suggest looking at the fit of the saddle first to at least deal with a possible cause that is still a relatively easy fix. One can always escalate the examination of further reasons afterwards.