

Leslie McGill – Saddle Fitter

Leslie McGill is a BCLM PC B2 candidate/alumni who represented BC at Young Rider's in Eventing, but who now competes in dressage. She is a custom saddle maker and fitter who works as 'The Saddle Doctor'

Saddle Fit

Why is saddle fit important? How can you tell if it needs to be done?

The most obvious answer is that the horse is unhappy:

1. **unhappy tacking up** (but don't confuse a horse being 'girthy' with being unhappy – 'girthy' is a learned behaviour)
2. **white hairs on the back.** This indicates that permanent damage has been done; usually found on either side of the withers.
3. the horse **doesn't like to halt** when ridden; drops back in transitions; won't raise back and round when trying to get him on the bit; on approach to a fence, slows down and drops the back; bucking on landing after a fence.
4. **when being groomed, horse will drop the back.**

Horses have a long term memory for pain, but not for pleasure.

How many types of saddle are there?

1. western – various styles
2. dressage
3. all purpose
4. close contact: not designed to have the rider sitting in the saddle
5. racing: saddle without a tree
6. trekking/endurance: generous pads on the backs, designed to be comfortable for both horse and rider for long periods
7. polo: similar look to a jumping saddle
8. pack saddle: framework of a tree to tie gear to
9. Australian stock saddle: a modified dressage-type saddle with giant knees rolls front and back; designed for comfort and long period usage
10. side saddle
11. Lane Fox: cut back saddle, used with saddlebreds, Morgans, etc.

What is a saddle?

Usually has a tree (but not always).

The withers hold the saddle. It sits on the muscles that are attached to the spine. The spine itself is approximately 4” below the horse’s skin.

Types of trees:

1. wood/steel tree = spring tree. Very little give from front to back. Most successful type of tree.
2. Synthetic/moulded: cheaper; not as well shaped
3. Treeless: no support. Rider’s weight digs into one spot after a period of time.
4. Western: natural horsemen prefer western saddles as they disperse the weight over a wider area.

The placement of the stirrup bars defines/determines the type of saddle; all trees are the same, otherwise.

A saddle is designed in two basic major pieces

1. top: padding
2. bottom: tree and covering

What are saddles flocked (stuffed) with?

1. wool (best)
2. foam (usually found in close contact saddles; problem: can’t go in and alter it)
3. horsehair (found in old Indian saddles)

Differences in Saddles:

1. Dressage: long, straighter flap; deeper seat; stirrup bar is further back
2. All purpose: the back of the saddle is further off the horse; round, forward saddle flap; seat is ‘scoopy’; there is a big distance between where the seat is and where the leg is; the stirrup bar is further back
3. Close contact: not a lot of padding, low back; shallow seat; stirrup bar is forward; forward cut flap

What will cause a change in fit, OR, why does my saddle not fit my horse anymore?

1. weight
2. muscle tone and fitness
3. growth/age

Many dressage riders get their saddles checked every six months. If a change is temporary (muscles, weight) then you can use a pad; otherwise, must have something changed in the saddle.

Most common problems for saddle fit:

1. too wide
2. too narrow

A saddle that’s too wide can imitate a saddle that’s too narrow.

A saddle that's too wide squishes a horse on top.

A saddle that's too narrow puts the pressure area lower, pinches behind the shoulder.

If a saddle is too narrow, there's nothing you can do to fix it – you must replace the saddle.

Weight Bearing Areas

Check saddle fit with the horse is standing normally, and when the horse's back is raised.

Fit the saddle to the type of work being asked:

- how much does this horse have to raise his back on a regular basis?

When the back is up, the feet can be used better (the horse moves better).

Fitting a Saddle:

1. Measure the horse's gullet just behind the withers with a stiff flexible shape; transfer that shape to a piece of paper. Take a second measure further back, in the middle of the back (beneath where the seat of the saddle would be). There is no need to go further back – the saddle is not supported by this weaker area of the back.
2. Stand up above and behind horse to view shoulders. See if one shoulder is higher or lower than another. The amount that the shoulder is higher will determine how much the saddle will be pushed around. It is more common for the left shoulder to be higher than the right. This is not a conformation fault; it's a muscle thing. This is *not a huge concern* unless it affects the saddle, because the higher shoulder pushes the saddle back, which knocks it off to the other side.

Where to put the saddle to check for fit:

1. put it up the neck
2. using no muscle yourself, push the saddle back until it finds the 'sweet' spot
3. make sure it's not too far back; the saddle should stop in the sweet spot, not just keep going. Some saddle/horse combinations have no sweet spot = bad fit.

How to Fit a Saddle.

1. put it in the sweet spot
2. make sure there's *clearance at the withers*
3. make sure it's not too far back
4. run your hand down under the front of the saddle to the end of the tree (front, at the point pocket).
5. *you can't argue with the girth lines* – the horse's conformation will determine where the girth lies
6. poke the horse under the tummy to raise his back: *does the saddle rock?* If yes, it will also pinch on the shoulders and withers.

7. check the pommel and cantle; *never have the cantle lower than the pommel*
8. you can, if need be, put pads in the front of the saddle, but NEVER under the back of the saddle; **pads** should always be viewed as a **temporary fix**
9. check with and without a girth

Gusset is a stitch line on the back panels of the saddle that allows the saddle to sit more evenly and squarely on the horse's back.

Does the tree match the horse's back?

Horses that are hard to fit = those with flat backs.

1. ponies (always the most difficult – might just achieve 'adequate' or 'acceptable' rather than great); ponies also have backs that make saddles roll from side to side – there's nothing you can do about this; try a crupper or a hunting or 5 point breastplate for added stability
2. Arabs
3. Standardbreds
4. any horse designed to pull a buggy rather than be ridden