

Points of Saddle Fitting

The following points are offered as a guide to any horse owner or rider wishing to proceed with the initial steps of assessing their saddle(s). However, the Master Saddlers Association strongly recommends that full evaluations of saddle fit are conducted by a [Certified Saddle Fitter](#).

Fitting saddles is like fitting a child's shoe, it needs to be done correctly to allow for movement without pinching or pain. If you are noticing discomfort or changes in your horse's attitude or behavior under saddle then it may be time for a professional assessment of how your saddle is fitting.

All the following steps need to be done with your horse standing squarely on level ground with his head and neck straight ahead, so an assistant may be necessary. Perform all the steps on both sides of your horse (most horses are asymmetrical) and with the saddle in direct contact with your horse's back, no pad.

Step One: Position Of The Saddle

Place the saddle slightly forward on the horse's withers. Next, press down on the pommel and slide the saddle rearward until it stops at the resting place which is dictated by each horse's conformation. Repeat this procedure several times until you feel the saddle stop in the same spot repeatedly, well behind the shoulder blade. Resist the temptation to place the saddle too far forward on the withers. This is a very common fitting mistake and can interfere with your horse's soundness and movement.

Step Two: Angle Of The Points

To find the points, lift the flap of the saddle and look for a little leather pocket into which the wooden processes of the pommel are fitted. This is the point pocket and there is one on both sides of the pommel of the saddle just under the stirrup bars. These points should lie parallel to the withers. If the angles are too narrow, the points will dig into the musculature, also causing the middle of the saddle to be in uneven contact with the horse's back. If they are too wide the saddle will sit down in front putting pressure on top of the withers. To assess the point angles, stand looking from the front with the flap lifted; the points should be parallel with the musculature within 10 degrees of the heaviest side. Some points are concealed making it difficult to determine their angles. If this is the case, you will have to rely more on the panel pressure procedure to determine if the point angles are correct.

Step Three: Panel Pressure and Contact

(Note: The panels are the wool stuffed underside of the saddle, which rest on the horse's back.)

Place one hand in the center of the saddle and press down to secure the saddle in place as you test for panel pressure. Run your other hand between the front of the panels and your horse's musculature and feel for any uneven pressure under the points. The front panel should not pinch the withers in any area. While maintaining pressure on the top of the saddle, run your hand, palm up, under the entire panel along the back feeling for even pressure. You may also raise the sweat flap to ensure that the panels fit snugly and evenly on both sides of the withers and along the back to check for bridging. Bridging is a space near the center of the where the panels do not make good contact with the horse's back. Wool stuffed panels are almost universally considered superior to foam for the following reasons: assuming correctly designed panels, wool conforms to the many shapes of the horses back and can be adjusted if necessary to correct for a multitude of fitting problems. You cannot, however, correct for a poorly designed or incorrectly fitted tree.

Step Four: Pommel To Cantle Relationship

Visualize a straight line parallel to the ground from the pommel to the cantle. In saddles with deep or moderately deep seats, the cantle should be between 2 to 3 inches higher than the pommel. In shallower seats, such as close contact jumping saddles, the cantle may only be approximately 1 to 2 inches higher than the pommel. In almost any saddle, if the cantle is level with or below the pommel, the saddle is not properly fitted.

Step Five: Level Seat

Visualize the same straight line parallel to the ground and look this time at the deepest part of the seat. This area should be level in order to put the rider squarely on their seat bones and in balance.

Step Six: Wither Clearance

There should be adequate clearance between the pommel and the top of the horse's withers, approximately two to three fingers. More than three fingers' clearance may mean the pommel is too high, i.e. the tree is too narrow. A saddle with less than 2-3 fingers may mean that the saddle is too wide. With wool stuffed panels, make allowance for the saddle to settle a half inch or so. There is an exception to this indicator: horses with flat, round withers may have more clearance than usual under the pommel. In these situations you may need to rely more on the balance of the seat and pommel to cantle relationship. On horses with high, narrow withers maintaining proper clearance is something that has to be monitored and maintained.

Step Seven: Channel Clearance/Gullet Width

There should also be adequate clearance over the spine and connective tissue throughout the channel of the saddle. A channel that is too narrow will impede the horse's movement dramatically and may even cause the spine to be observably sore. Feel the width of the spine and connective tissue with your fingers and estimate its width. The channel of the saddle should completely clear this width, resting on the long back muscle of the back called the longissimus dorsi.

Repeat Steps 6 & 7 with the rider in the saddle, checking for adequate clearance over the withers and spine.

Step Eight: Saddle Stability

The saddle should remain stable and not shift excessively from side to side or from front to back. Keep in mind that such shifting may be a function of your horse's symmetry and not the saddle. A qualified saddle fitter should be able to make suggestions to minimize or eliminate the problem.

Step Nine: Seat Length

The saddle should never go behind the 18th thoracic vertebra, which is the vertebra corresponding with the last rib. Behind this vertebra are the lumbar vertebrae, which is the weakest, non-weight bearing area of the back.

Step Ten: Horse Response

Throughout the whole saddle fitting process, monitor your horse's response. Watch his ears and body language. Does he try to step away from the saddle or flinch when it is placed on his back? Or is the opposite true; is he more accepting of the saddle? How does he move when he is ridden? Does he seem freer or more restricted? The horse is the most honest indicator we have when fitting a saddle so pay attention to it and note any changes.