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Horse Deals looks at why saddle fitting is so important and how traditional and high tech methods can provide the perfect mix

Are you fitting comfortably?



Hi tech Master Saddler Mark Fisher at work

For a saddle to be fit for the job, it has to fit you and your horse. Whether you're looking at a £2,000 top-of-the-range design or a £250 synthetic saddle, it's a purchase that affects you and your horse's comfort, soundness and performance.

When you're buying a saddle, use a knowledgeable fitter who can assess you as well as your horse. For instance, if you put more weight on one side than the other, is it riding technique that can be corrected or do you have wear and tear you can't compensate for? In the second scenario, your fitter may want to adjust the saddle to compensate for your imbalance.

While not every good fitter holds the Society of Master Saddlers' (SMS) fitting qualification, it is a good recommendation. To make sure you don't waste your time and money, give an accurate description of you, your horse and your ability when you make the booking. A fitter who expects to find a 9st rider and a fit horse and finds a 12st person with an overweight cob won't necessarily have brought suitable saddles.

Ask lots of questions. A good fitter will explain what's suitable,

what isn't and why and will give you guidelines on how to recognise when you need your saddle checked again. Some riders like to have their trainers present, but it's important that the latter isn't set on a particular make of saddle for every horse — what fits and suits one partnership won't necessarily be suitable for another.

Manufacturers offer so many options, from a range of trees and adjustable headplates to miracles of engineering and construction, that no problem should be unsolvable. Adaptable saddles mean that if you sell or retire a horse and want to use your saddle on a new one, there's more chance it can be altered to fit, while the retailer may be able to carry a smaller number of saddles.

While traditional saddle fitting skills can't be replaced by technology, today's saddle fitters have a new generation of high tech help available. Many manufacturers and retail centres have been involved in research using the Novel Pliance pressure measuring system; this can be used to evaluate not only saddles and riders but to see the effect of numnahs and pads.

The British Equestrian Federation and the SMS jointly own a Pliance system, which is operated by master saddler and qualified fitter Mark Fisher from Woolcroft Equine Services, Cambridgeshire. A mat with more than 250 sensors is placed under the saddle and transmits pressure pictures to a computer, showing exactly what's happening underneath the rider.

"It isn't always the saddle that's to blame with problems such as movement over to one side," says Mark. "For instance, even some of our best riders can tend to load their weight to one side, which means the saddle follows.

"We can compensate by adjusting the saddle, but it shows the importance of looking after yourself as well as your horse. If you're asymmetrical because of injury or wear and tear, get yourself looked at by a good physio or other qualified person and if you're not already doing so, get help from a good trainer."

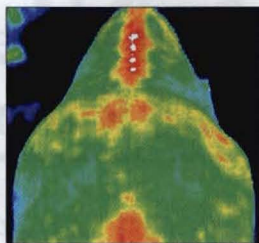
Graham and Lynn Butt of Llwynon Saddlery, on the edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park, have their own Pliance system, which they use as a back up for identifying problems and testing products for manufacturers. Martin Wilkinson Saddlers has also been involved in SMS testing and warns its clients that the latest findings show that mounting from the ground is bad news for the



Second-hand saddles: when buying a saddle, you must ensure it's fitted properly



Equinalysis can be used in conjunction with the Pliance system



This Equiscan shows a horse with wither inflammation caused by a damaged saddle

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Even some of our best riders tend to load their weight to one side –

Mark Fisher



Many experts advise using a high-wither numnah for all horses

horse's back and the saddle — some tests registered more than double the peak pressure recorded when jumping a 1.40m fence.

Mark has also run tests in which Pliance and the Equinalysis gait analysis system have been used together. Equinalysis, a video-based system, was developed by British Olympic team farrier Haydn Price and human biomechanics specialist Professor John Davies. It is used by many top riders and in tests Mark has seen saddle fit affect gait changes.

Thermography is also being used to assess saddle fit. This highlights temperature differences in the area scanned and vets may use it to pinpoint areas that need more veterinary investigation. It can also be used to help solve saddle problems and digital thermal infrared imaging is available through specialist companies such as Equiscan.

Sophie Gent, owner of Equiscan, visits clients' yards and scans horses in their stables.

"It's totally non-invasive — you don't actually touch them and most horses stay perfectly relaxed about it," she says.

First, Sophie scans the horse's back before it's worked. Next, the horse is worked in its normal regime; the saddle is then removed and both the horse's back and the underside of the saddle are scanned.

"If, for instance, a rider is leaning too far to one side, this will show on the saddle scan," explains Sophie.

As she's not a vet, Sophie can't diagnose, but she says she can highlight problems that vets can then investigate; she will also work with clients' vets. When she's scanned a horse, the scans are sent for veterinary interpretation and owners are given a report.

In one case, a horse scanned for suspected sacral problems showed inflammation over four vertebrae in the withers area. This was traced to a damaged saddle, which had caused the injury.

In the past few years, there has been a huge rise in the popularity of treeless and part-treed saddles. At one time, they got a bad press because some riders assumed that because they were flexible, they would fit any horse and rider without needing to be balanced.

However, modern designs are light years away from those first ones and those who report consistent success stories use shims and pads for perfect adjustment.

"There will never be a saddle that's a magic wand, which can just be placed on a horse's back without thought of his conformation," says Heather Moffett, founder of Enlightened Equitation and designer of the Phoenix flexible concept saddle. "Thankfully, with many treeless and part-treed saddles, adjustments can be made in the form of shimming and/or padding, rather than having to return your saddle for alteration."

Anne Bondi, managing director of Solution Saddles, says the Solution treeless system is designed to be used with balance pads where the horse's back profile or conformation requires.

"The saddle doesn't mould permanently to the horse's back, but flexes into the back shape with the horse's movement," she explains.

Anne's success stories include horses with physical and behavioural problems referred to Dr Sue Dyson at the Animal Health Trust, Newmarket. Reports and more information can be seen on the Solution Saddles website.

The final piece of the saddle-fitting jigsaw may be the

accessories you use and the way you adjust them. For instance, are you using a dressage girth that is too short, so that the buckles catch the horse's elbows as he moves? Does your numnah pull down on the withers because it's badly cut?

Many experts now advise using a numnah cut for high-withered horses as a matter of course, as this will be more likely to stay off the withers. There are also pads and numnahs designed to aid stability on animals with round bodies.

You need to be just as careful with accessories for treeless saddles. Birgit Michaux from treeless specialist Dream Team Products says that if your horse is easy to girth and the girth stays where you place it, you're best off with a well-made non-elasticated version that is the right shape for your horse's belly profile; she recommends a curved girth for a horse with a hanging belly or curved ribcage and a waved one for an animal with a narrow girthing area.

If you need an elasticated girth, Brigit advises using one with elastic at both ends to avoid putting more pressure on one side than the other. This advice applies equally to treed saddles.

Listen to the experts and to your horse. That way, you and your horse will find the perfect saddle and the perfect fit.

Pictures by Society of Master Saddlers, Barnsby, Equinalysis, Equiscan and Horse Deals

Useful websites

Society of Master Saddlers:

www.mastersaddlers.co.uk

Pliance: www.novel.de

Equinalysis: www.equinalysis.com

Equiscan: www.equiscan.co.uk

Enlightened Equitation and Phoenix saddles:

www.enlightenedequitation.com

Solution Saddles: www.solution-saddles.co.uk

How does the rider sit?
How does the saddle fit?
What does the horse feel?

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