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Saddle fitting - By Andre Bubear

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Know when you can...



And when, perhaps, you shouldn't.

Over the last few years I have found, talking to clients, that there is a lot more interest in saddle fitting now. I get asked many questions on all aspects of this so have decided to put pen to paper and answer these questions for all interested parties to see.

There are a lot more saddle fitting websites in France now, many of which offer good sound advice and information on saddle fitting. Unfortunately, however, some of these sites are inaccurate and a bit misleading.

The same for saddle fitters; there are many site offering good advice and a professional service, whereas some just want to sell you a new often expensive saddle.

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Some general points to remember are:

Firstly the saddle. Whatever the make, type or age, it must be fitted correctly irrespective of the shape of the horse. From a high wither thoroughbred type, to your average build horse/pony, through to your wider cob types, the saddle must be fitted to the horse.

This applies to all saddle styles as well. From close contact to high wither saddles. It does not matter if they are wool panels, felt foam or latex formed panels, the criteria is the same. There is, of course however, a difference when fitting a military saddle, a McClellan (a popular design for a trekking saddle), and western or endurance saddles that have 'fans' at the back. They need specialised knowledge and can, if fitted incorrectly, cause serious injury to the horse in the lumbar area.

The **saddle fitter should be qualified and offering a full professional service**, not just a salesman trying to sell you a new saddle 'Because your old one does not fit'. He or she should not just be aware how the saddle should fit and why it may not, but also how it might be adapted to improve the fit to the horse, depending on the tree shape and panel type. They should know which saddles can be fitted on the spot (usually wool panelled but not always) and what saddle needs to be taken to the 'Atelier to be worked on. Sometimes it is possible to use a special machine to change the angle of the arcade, again this is only possible on certain saddles, and others can only be modified by the manufactures themselves. It is important to know which manufacturers offer this service, as well as which saddles can, unfortunately, not be modified at all.

I always suggest to a new client that we start with their own saddle, that they may think just does not fit, as it maybe that it simply has never been looked at and can be adapted to fit the horse correctly. I was asked to supply a new 'Thoroughgood Endurance' saddle recently and when I visited I asked to see

the clients old saddle. She assured me it was no good and that she needed a new one and, to cut a long story short, the saddle was a 20 odd year old 'Thorowgood Endurance' that had never had any maintenance and was still in good condition considering its age. I topped up the flocking then and there. Refitted it to the horse, the rider tried it again and could not believe the difference not just for her horse, but also for her, her position on the saddle was so much better.

So, OK, no saddle sold this time, but the saddle fitted the horse and the client is happy, and much better off, so hopefully she will pass on your name to friends. With regard to choice of new saddle, most clients have an idea of the type of saddle they want, depending on what they need it for and, of course, their budget.

Most saddle fitters recommend the brands they themselves supply, which, naturally, is fine as long as the saddle in question can be fitted correctly and be suitable for the activities it is intended to be used for.

Saddle Type

There is now very large selection of saddle types/styles offered by manufacturers who have their own idea of the way a saddle should fit and come up with inventive ways with which to achieve this. From flexible trees to adjustable trees, cutaway panels, air panels, part air filled panels, adjustable heads at the arcade, to name but a few and of course changeable arcades to suit almost all horse types from the high wither to the extra wide cob types.

This has revolutionised saddle fitting in many cases and, naturally, some are better than others. In my opinion there is no point in having a changeable 'arcade system' if you can't also adapt the panels to match, as one goes hand in hand with the other. If you alter the front of the saddle then you may have to adapt the back of the saddle, to get the saddle in balance, not just for the

horses comfort but also rider position. This should be a straight forward, on the spot, adaption if the panels are wool or part wool and so, it goes without saying, that your saddle fitter/saddle supplier should know and be able to do this routine job on site, at your convenience.

I, personally, almost exclusively supply wool panelled saddles, simply because they are more adjustable to the horse's comfort and rider's balance. Every saddle I supply, either new or occasion, comes with a 1st free refit after approx 6-12 weeks (depending on usage) because I know the wool will flatten down and have to be 'topped up' again. I don't know of any wool panel saddle that does not need, at some stage, the panel's checking and adjusting.

Wool panel's do need regular checking and adjusting, specially if your horse loses or gains condition during the year. Some people may think it is an extra expense they don't want to have, but in my experience, more people are happy to pay this knowing that their horses saddle will always be fitting correctly. Formed or felt/latex panels may not be quite so easy to adapt, although some manufactures supply plastic or felt inserts. So if the horse does have a change in weight it is not as straightforward to make the necessary additions, especial over the wither 'garrot', or to lift the back of the panel to properly balance the saddle.

For a first, or training, saddle for a young horse, I often hear from young horse owners that they believe, as the saddle is only going to be used for training purposes and getting used to having a saddle on, it does not really need to be a good and well fitted saddle. As a result, they usually just use any old saddle they have spare.

However, I believe that the first saddle a horse has should be fitting correctly and be comfortable. A lot of damage can be done to the young horses back

by incorrect use of a badly fitting, and often broken saddle. Thankfully, I think horse owners these days are more enlightened and appreciate the needs of the young horse.

A brief mention on the choice of saddle and prices range from very cheap "Synthetic saddles" through to beautifully made and finished leather saddles, that, naturally, cost significantly more.

However, cost does not signify suitability. I have known some very good synthetic saddles which are very reasonably priced that will fit and adapt to the horse, in most cases, perfectly well. Alternatively, I have seen saddle's with a price tag of over 2-3 or even 4 thousand euros that are a really atrocious fit and can cause injury to the horse. This goes to show that there is a saddle out there for the money you can afford that will fit your horse correctly.

Saddle fitting is on going, with new ideas constantly coming along. For instance it was often thought not acceptable to put a longer saddle on a shorter horse. Now, however, we appreciate that if the rider needs a bigger saddle, then with corrective fitting of the panels, removing direct pressure from the back of the saddle it is, in fact, possible to fit a longer than normal saddle to a short backed horse. Again, **this is specialised alteration and must only be undertaken by a professional saddle fitter.**

In the UK qualified saddle fitters have to have a refresher course every 2 years, to keep up with changing ideas. In fact, now all qualified saddle fitters must also be qualified in reflocking a saddle before they can take the saddle fitters qualification be registered.

I, of course, understand that for many people fitting saddles, it is not possible to fulfil this criteria, but I think that it is a good idea to be aware of what knowledge is out there and available to you.

These are just a few of the observations I have been asked over my last few

years here, if there is anything else that I can assist you with then please don't hesitate to contact me at andreub@yahoo.co.uk.

People say I am more interested in the horse than in the rider and I suppose, in a way, that is the truth to an extent. After the rider can tell me when he/she is not comfortable in the saddle, in most cases the horse can not and I believe, that it is the horse doing most of the work and so has to be both happy and comfortable in order to perform to the best of his ability.



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