

Does Your Dressage Saddle Fit?

A British Master Saddler's checklist for making sure your current dressage saddle (or a new one you might be trying) isn't causing your horse problems.

By Michael Dainton

Right Fit

1. The stripped-down saddle tree in this photo makes the importance of correct fit really clear. This tree makes even contact all the way down, so the points--ends--of the tree lie around the horse behind the shoulder muscle, not on the shoulder and digging in.

2. My hand is over the shoulder muscle here, my fingertips marking its edges, which you want the saddle to lie behind. If you have trouble defining your horse's shoulder, run your hand up from the elbow; a vertical line from that point will run by the edge of the shoulder muscle. Just behind that line is where you want the saddle to lie.

3. Here you see a saddle fitting the same way the tree did in photo 1. Its panel is evenly in contact all the way down, with no pressure points and no gaps. My finger is on the point of the tree; as you can see, it's behind the shoulder and the whole tree is *around* the horse, instead of the point of the tree bearing in on him.

4. From the side, we check for balance. Sitting in the correct spot behind the shoulder, this saddle isn't pommel- or cantle-high; the center of the seat is the deepest point.

5. We inspect both sides for "bridging"--gaps under the panels, instead of even contact the full length. This saddle sits nice and flat on Oliver's back--no gaps under the rear portion of the panel.

6. And no gaps under the seat--I'm lifting the sweat flap, as well as the top flap, to check.

7. From the back, being able to see light through the gullet (oops--the horse rested a leg and shifted the saddle off-center just as the shutter snapped) shows the saddle is off his spine.



8. And the addition of a thin saddle pad changes nothing about the fit.

Wrong Fit

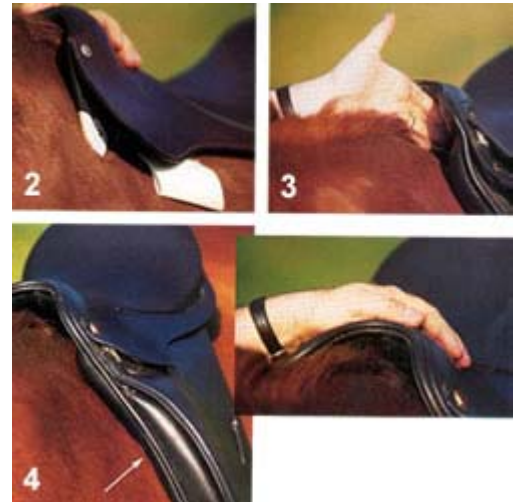
1. Look at these photos of a cutback and a regular tree, both too narrow for this horse. They sit too high on his withers; with a rider in the saddle, the points of either one would dig into his shoulder, focusing all the rider's weight on those two spots, making him sore and discouraging him from extending.

2. Because this narrow saddle's tree isn't making contact around the horse, it won't stay behind his shoulder muscle. As I'm demonstrating, it'll ride forward, up the horse's neck, placing the points of the tree above his shoulder, digging into his withers.



3. A too-narrow saddle also puts the pommel too high--I can fit all my fingers in, and that's too much--making a gap at the top of the panel, revealed by the shadow in line with the D rings here.

4. Here's the opposite problem: a saddle that's too wide. The biggest giveaway is the too-low pommel--you can't fit more than one finger under it, and you couldn't see light through the gullet from behind. With a rider up, the pommel will probably rest right on top of the withers. The points of this tree are wrapping around--but they're so low that there's actually a gap just beneath them where the saddle flares away from his sides.



Excerpted from "Does Your Dressage Saddle Fit?" in the October 2000 issue of *Practical Horseman* magazine. For more information on the causes of back pain in horses, see "Back Trouble" in the September 2005 issue.

All photos by Mandy Lorraine

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