

MU Guide

Selecting a Saddle

Melvin Bradley and Wayne Loch
Department of Animal Sciences

A saddle is one of the first pieces of equipment most people buy after they acquire a horse. It is a major investment; selecting and purchasing require much deliberation and knowledge. The life span of most saddles is several times that of a horse, so take great care in selecting a saddle.

The selected saddle should fit the needs of the rider and the type of horse. Supplement personal preference with knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of the many different styles and types of saddles.

Selecting a riding style

The first step in selecting a saddle is to determine which style of riding you prefer (see Table 1). For many riders this may not be important. The decision probably was made long before and the horse was purchased specifically for that style. For a beginner, however, selecting the riding style may pose more of a problem. Each style has its advantages and disadvantages.

Table 1. Styles of saddles

Stock	Hunt-Jump	Dressage
Roping	Forward seat	Miscellaneous
Cutting	Balance seat	Racing
General-purpose	Polo	Side saddles
Speciality	Gaited	Trick saddles
	Lane Fox	Parade

Even though one riding style may have been selected, there is a great deal of variation among the saddles within it. Tradition, experience and exposure to other riders must then be considered.

Western or stock saddles tend to be large and heavy. They may be difficult for youngsters to handle. However, they offer a great deal of security for a beginner. The thickness of the saddle and the amount of leather under the leg, knee and seat isolate the horse from the rider.

Western saddles are probably more versatile, rugged and durable than other styles. They are available in a wide range of designs and prices.

Hunt-jump saddles are usually rather light and easily handled. Here, too, a wide variety of designs and prices is available. This type of saddle allows the rider,



The barrel saddle (top) and roping saddle (bottom) are two of the many types of saddles available.

in most cases, to sit close to the horse, to feel the horse and to communicate more readily with seat and legs. As a rule, these saddles require more training of the rider in developing a sure seat than with stock saddles. But this usually leads to much better equitation form.

Saddles used to ride and exhibit gaited or park horses, such as the Lane Fox saddle, are rather limited in use. They retain many of the advantages of the hunt-jump saddles — they are lightweight and allow ease of communication. However, they place the rider so far behind the withers that the only way for the rider to be in balance with the horse is to have the horse well collected and working off its quarters. This style of saddle provides minimum security for the rider; any rider must learn to ride such a saddle properly. There is nothing “sissy” about the Lane Fox saddle.

Dressage saddles provide the rider with maximum ease of communication with the horse and keep the rider in perfect balance and form, whether the horse is highly collected or mildly extended, all within the rather narrow limits of tradition.

There are many saddles designed for specific purposes other than those previously mentioned. These include side-saddle, trick saddle and special show or display saddle. These saddles are very specific in their design. Using them for anything other than their intended purpose should be discouraged. Safety, comfort of the rider and ability to maintain soundness of the horse must be considered before beauty or the desire for a unique design.

The style of riding dictates the general type of saddle. Consider four basic criteria: (1) the saddle must fit the horse; (2) the saddle should not interfere with the performance or the ability of the horse to perform; (3) the saddle must fit the job or the activities desired; and (4) the saddle should fit the rider physically.

Fitting a saddle to a horse

Not every saddle fits every horse, just as one size or shape of boot does not fit every human. Some points of the horse’s anatomy that must be checked when considering a saddle include the size and shape of the withers, length of back, slope of shoulder, spring of rib, and muscling, especially of the shoulder. To some extent, you may need to consider the overall size of the horse, especially on smaller horses and ponies.

Most saddle fitting problems occur at the withers. There must be ample clearance at the withers to prevent injury, yet not so much space that all security is lost. Also, pressures should not be concentrated on small areas of the back and withers. In a stock saddle with rider mounted, there should be about 2 inches of clearance between the withers and the gullet of the saddle.

Insufficient clearance, even with a heavy saddle blanket, means the fork of the saddle is too wide, or the withers of the horse are too high and narrow, or both. Adding a heavy pad or a second or third blanket may

help. It is better, however, to get a narrower saddle if possible.

Injury to the withers is usually the result of a poorly fitted saddle. In addition to being painful to the horse, it frequently results in bad habits such as bucking and head slinging, and it may cause the horse to resist saddling. Ill-fitting saddles are sometimes a result of the rider’s inconsideration but more often result from a lack of knowledge and attention to the welfare of the horse.

Horses with flat, “mutton” withers often wear saddles that are too narrow. This causes them to sit much too high in front. Additional blankets will help prevent a sore back, but little else can be done to alleviate the problem. If possible, to avoid the pain and fatigue that result from this situation, change the saddle or the horse. No roping should ever be attempted using an excessively narrow saddle on such a horse.

To fit your horse properly, measure the width of the withers. Width taken at a point 2 inches below the top of the withers should correspond to the fork width of the saddle. Since blankets and pads will compensate for some misfitting, there can be some variation. Therefore, getting exactly 2 inches is not critical.

Width of the fork of stock saddles varies from 5½ inches to 7 inches. Average saddles are between 6 and 6¾ inches wide. This width accommodates most horses with use of a good blanket or pad.

The width of a stock saddle can be approximated by measuring between the bars at the point where the saddle strings pass through the skirts. If the saddle does not have saddle strings in front, this measurement can be taken at a point about 1 inch above the lower edge of the bars, directly below the horn. Every secondhand or used saddle should be measured despite claims of size as there can be some spreading with use.

The width of English saddle heads is not as critical as the fork width of a stock saddle but should be considered. It may be necessary to go to a “cut-back” head to prevent damage to the withers. The “cut-back” can range from very slight to more than 4 inches. One major advantage of a “cut-back” head is that the saddle can fit a wide variety of horses.

The head of hunt-jump saddles, especially less expensive brands, can spread a great deal without breaking. In considering a used saddle of this type, check width between the points of the head, especially if the saddle is to be used in shows. Little can be done to improve the fit of a wide-fronted hunt-jump saddle except to find a horse with appropriate anatomy.

A stock saddle should lie directly over the upper end of the shoulder blades. This allows maximum area of contact between horse and saddle, distributing the load and pressures to minimize sore backs.

If the horse is straight-shouldered or if the saddle tends to slip back because of poor riding habits, the bars place great pressure on the back edge of the shoulder blades. Even blankets can’t completely eliminate this

concentration of pressure. For this condition, a breast collar is needed to keep the saddle well forward over the shoulder blades.

Any time the girth slopes backward to the rigging, a breast collar is needed. Simply tightening the girth will not produce desired results because it increases pressure at the withers. The backward and forward movement of the tightened girth then causes girth galls, particularly on fat horses.

Length of the bars of a stock saddle should also be considered. A long-barred saddle on a very short-backed horse can cause too much pressure over the loin and kidney area of the horse's back, resulting in injury and soreness. The square-cut skirts on some stock saddles may also irritate the flanks of short-backed horses.

Using a saddle

Performance of any horse can be hindered if the rider does not remain over the center of balance of the horse. Since the center of balance changes with different speeds and kinds of activity, a saddle must be selected that will help the rider be in balance during a specific type of performance. Not only will this aid in achieving maximum performance, it will mean a great deal to the rider in comfort and security.

The center of balance of a horse standing or walking freely lies directly over a point a few inches behind the withers.

As the horse moves forward at speed, the point of balance moves forward. Jockeys provide a good example of weight well forward on the shoulder, permitting full potential performance of the horse. Even pleasure riders find that "getting forward" is not only comfortable for themselves, but it also seems to allow freer movement of the horse.

A horse jumping is another rather extreme example of a forward shift in the center of balance. The extreme forward seat or jumping saddle has been designed to place the rider's weight, borne by the knees and feet, well forward onto the shoulder and keep it there. Because of the extreme forward placement of the center of the seat, however, such saddles are not always comfortable for pleasure riding on flat surfaces.

Stock seat riders who have attempted to jump in stock saddles can appreciate what the expression "being behind one's horse" means. Not only is this hard on the rider's back and neck, it also is uncomfortable to the horse and usually causes it to refuse a jump.

The more collected a horse is, the farther to the rear the center of balance is displaced. Therefore, the rider of a gaited horse in a collected center needs to be well back from the withers to free the forehand and put his or her weight more over the horse's quarters.

Cutting horses work primarily off the quarters and are very light on the forehand. Saddles currently used have been designed to allow riders to shift their weight

from front to rear easily.

The basic design of a saddle usually allows some latitude in placement. The hunt-jump saddle "positions" the rider through the center of the seat. A rider can use various billet strap combinations, however, to change the position by as much as 3 to 4 inches. This permits the saddle to be placed properly for different activities or to accommodate a variety of conformation differences.

Placement of stock saddles is governed by position of the rigging. Rigging can be anywhere from full rigging (directly below the horn) to the center-fire rigging (halfway between the horn and the top of the cantle). The average pleasure rider who doesn't use a rope will probably find seven-eighths rigging most comfortable and readily available.

The full-rigged saddle was designed especially for roping. It places the horn, rigging and cinch in a straight line directly over the withers. This permits maximum strength of construction and correctly places the stress from the rope at the withers.

Shape of the seat of a saddle is important to both pleasure and equitation riders. Steep seats force the rider to the rear and may offer security, but experienced riders usually find them uncomfortable. This is especially true of pleasure riders with uncollected mounts. Equitation riders must be able to stay in balance with the horse.

Obviously, no one will rope off of a Lane Fox saddle, just as no one would attempt to show a five-gaited horse in a roping saddle. Tradition often dictates what type of saddle should be used. Tradition, however, must not replace common sense. It is important to select a saddle designed to permit a specific type of performance.

The full double-rigged stock saddle frequently advertised as a roping saddle is not designed for pleasure riding. It is excellent for roping.

The extreme forward seat jumping saddle was designed only for jumping. The rider must use relatively short stirrups and be out of the saddle—that is, not sitting in the saddle much of the time. When the stirrups are long enough to allow the rider to sit down and relax, the knees tend to drop out of the knee pockets and the back of the saddle tips forward.

Most saddle makers advertise their saddles using such expressions as roper, cutter or equitation. Keep in mind that these are advertising claims and should be viewed in the same light as the claims for headache remedies, razor blades or automobiles.

In so far as possible, the saddle should fit the rider. The rider's safety, comfort and show ring success all depend on proper saddle size.

Length of a hunt-jump saddle is measured from the head nail to the center of the top of the cantle. Standard lengths are 17, 18 and 19 inches when the saddle is constructed on a straight-head tree. Lengths on a slope-head tree usually are 1 to 1½ inches less. The tendency usually is to ride too small a saddle rather

than one too large.

Probably the most critical test for hunter-seat riders is the position of the knees in the knee pockets. Regardless of length of seat, unless the knees fit into the knee pockets with proper length of stirrup, the saddle does not fit. Although measurements can be made, it is usually advisable to try a hunt-jump saddle for size as it rests on a horse before purchasing it.

The tree is the foundation of every saddle. One of the first steps in evaluating a saddle is to check the tree. Some cheap saddles are made with canvas-covered trees; others are made with the tree only partially covered with rawhide.

A relatively recent innovation in saddle making is the extruded plastic tree sold under the trade name Ralide. These plastic trees seem to be strong, durable and free from warping. They reduce weight and cost because they eliminate a great deal of the hand labor of building up a ground seat. Rawhide-covered wooden trees are still used on most high quality stock saddles.

English saddles are usually built on a rigid tree with a straight head or on a spring tree, usually with a sloped head. Slope-head spring trees are relatively new with only a few manufacturers using them, but they seem to be increasing in popularity. Another innovation is the recessed stirrup bar. The combination of slope head and recessed stirrup bar nearly eliminates the hump under the thigh on old models.

Ornate finishes on stock saddles are not always just decorative. The designs serve to hide scratches and to increase the rider's grip. Hand-carved saddles are

usually quite expensive. If done well, it is a work of art. But carving creates a cleaning problem.

Embossed saddles are less expensive than carved saddles. The high quality of most embossing plates may cause difficulty distinguishing between carving and embossing without careful inspection or looking at the underside of the leather. Poor-quality embossing is especially noticeable on the swells, where it tends to fade out.

Stirrup adjustments vary considerably. The ease with which adjustments can be made is important if several people use the saddle. The patented Blevins buckle is usually found on better-quality stock saddles. It is one of the best and easiest to use. Double-tongued and sometimes single-tongued buckles are normally used on less-expensive saddles with narrow stirrup leathers. Such buckles are satisfactory for adjusting stirrups, yet the overall quality of the saddle may not be acceptable.

The quick-change buckle is one of the most common. It usually works well, but it may jam if it is not kept aligned and free of rust. Stirrup pins replace leather laces, which were traditional at one time.

After final deliberation and selection, the real work of the saddle begins. Remember that the saddle is a device to help the rider maintain a proper and secure seat. In other words, the saddle was meant to be used, not kept on display as a trophy.

This publication was revised with the assistance of Jennifer Nabors.