AT HOME SADDLE-FITTING WORKSHOP
WITH PATTY MERLI: PART II

In Part I of the *At Home Saddle-Fitting Workshop* with professional saddle fitter Patty Merli, we learned about saddle placement as well as tree width and clearance. Part II will cover tree shape, saddle length, balance, and contact and stability. All of the elements covered in this two-part series are things you can check on your saddle at home. If you have any questions or concerns, contact a professional fitter so you can be sure your horse's equipment fits properly so he can be happy, sound, and willing in his work.

TREE SHAPE

The profile of your saddle (looking at it from the side), or the tree shape, should match your horse's shape. Some trees have more curve, just like some horses have more curve in their backs. If you are riding a flat-backed horse in a banana shaped tree, there is going to be a pressure point. Similarly, if a horse is curved in his back and you have a saddle that is very straight, you will have pressure at the front and back of the saddle. This is called bridging. Bridging can also come from the tree being too narrow, or the saddle sitting too far forward.

Place your saddle on your horse without a saddle pad. While standing on your horse's left (or near) side, slide the tips of your right hand (up to the first knuckle) under the stirrup bar. Slowly slide your hand towards the back of the saddle and out the back. Do it a few times. Any place that your hand is restricted or difficult to move is a pressure point. Increased pressure can create muscle damage, so it is important that the pressure is even throughout the panels. Be sure to also go to your horse's right (off) side and run the fingers of your left hand under the saddle. It is important to check both sides when assessing the fit of your saddle.

LENGTH OF THE SADDLE

Now that we know our saddle is in the correct place and is the correct width and shape, we need to be certain the weight of the rider is not distributed past the horse's last, or 18th, rib. Saddle fitters will see a lot of lumbar soreness due to saddles being too long on the horse's back. There is nothing to support the weight of the rider after the horse's last rib, so this is also a very important aspect to check.

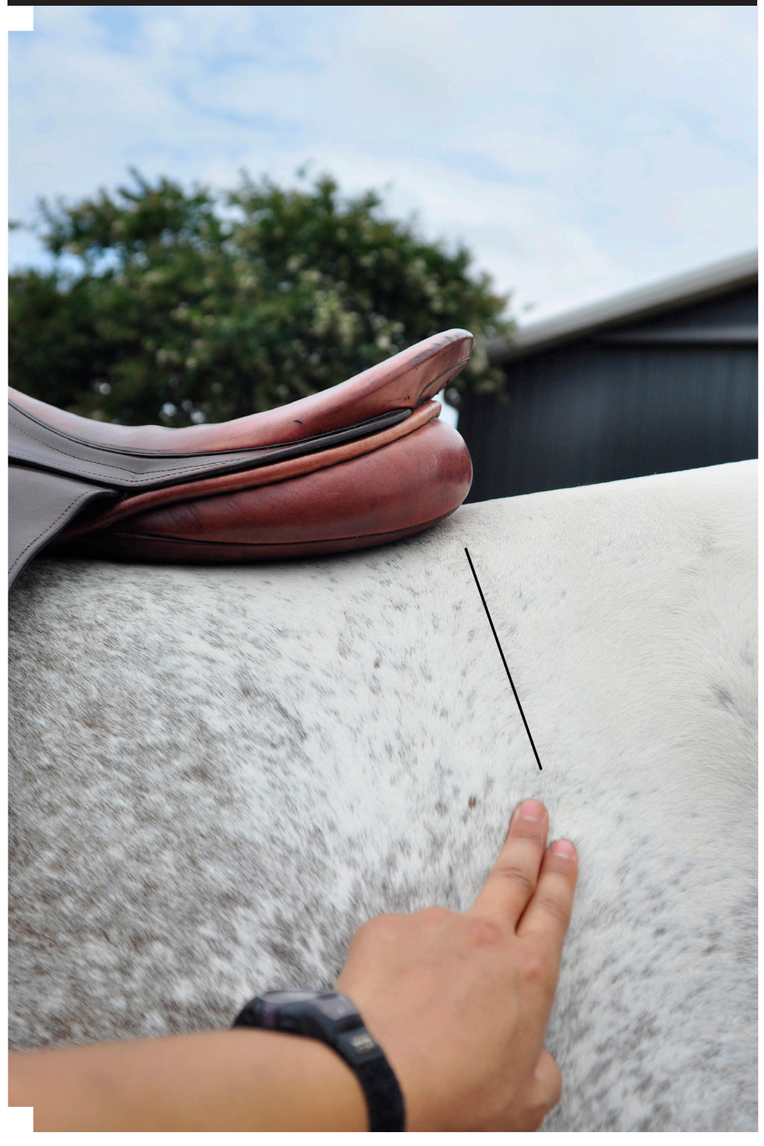
Locate your horse's last rib further down on his belly, where it will be easy to feel. With your finger, follow his last rib up towards the top of his back where the saddle will sit. After you have found his last rib, place your saddle without a pad on his back and see if your saddle is still in contact with his back after that last rib. Some horses are short backed, and that in combination with a rider needing a larger saddle can be tricky, but there are ways to work around it. This is best done with the consultation of a qualified saddle fitter, so do not be discouraged!

SADDLE BALANCE

While the saddle is on without a saddle pad, this is a great time to check the balance of your saddle. In a balanced saddle, the lowest point of the seat is parallel to the ground. Without a rider, the saddle should sit slightly higher in the front because once we have tightened our girth and put our weight in the stirrup, we have compressed the front of the panels slightly more.

Just because we have a saddle with the correct tree width does not mean that the saddle will be in balance. Imagine a very uphill horse with a high wither or a croup-high horse with very small wither. The horse that is uphill with a pronounced wither will need a panel that is deeper at the back than the horse that is croup high.

To check the length of a saddle, locate the horse's last rib and then follow it upwards (as indicated by the black line). Make sure the saddle does not contact the horse's back past that last rib. This saddle is cutting it close but is still an acceptable length for this horse.

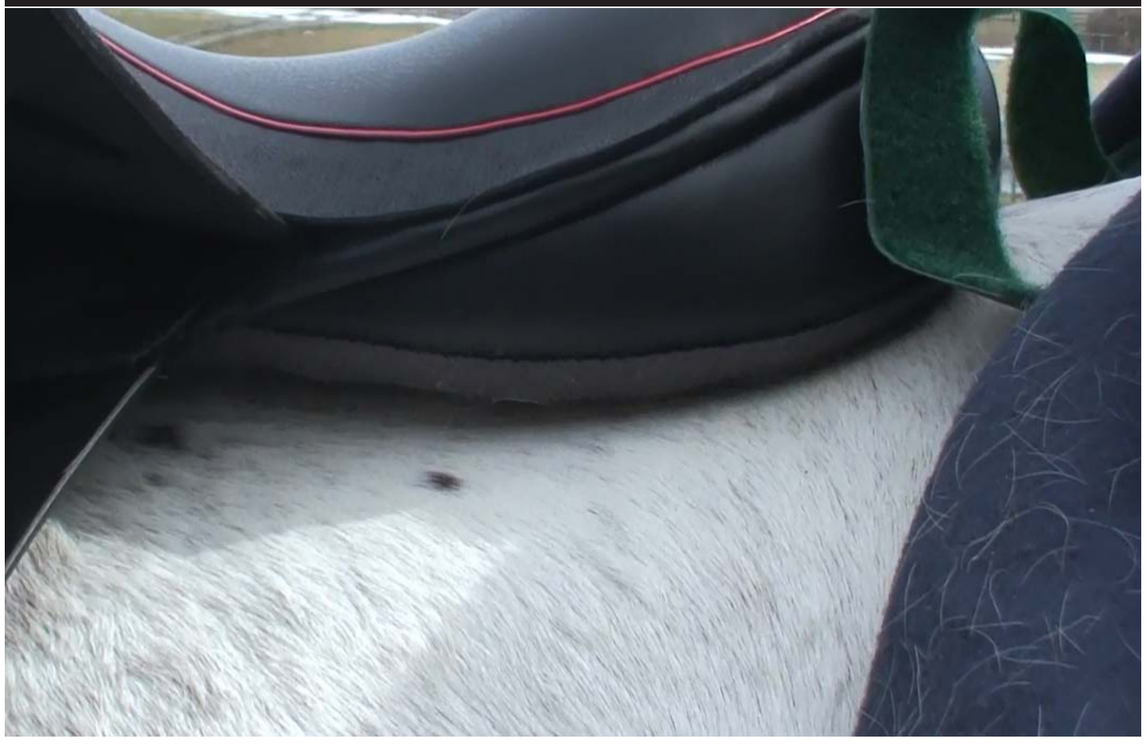


CONTACT AND STABILITY

Finally, we need to be certain that the saddle is stable on the horse's back while he is working. A saddle that slides forward or back, has too much movement at the back of the saddle, or slides off to one side needs to be addressed.

The first place to start is discovering the movement, but this is best judged by the trained eye of a saddle fitter on

ABOVE: Notice how the stitchline is parallel to the horse's back with an upswept back gusset. BELOW: The stitchline points downwards, creating a pressure point. OPPOSITE: This saddle is bridging badly. You can see daylight between the saddle and the horse's back. Bridging means that the saddle has uneven pressure between the front, back, and middle of the saddle.



the ground. Saddle movements is a bit more complicated, because there are many factors that can cause an unstable saddle, including the billets, girth selection, and type of flocking. Adjusting the flocking in a saddle can drastically change the fit.

Saddle fitting is interesting, sometimes complicated and often frustrating. Sometimes, just one aspect of the fit can be changed to make the saddle comfortable for the horse and rider. However, keep in mind that when you change one of the aspects of the fit on your horse, it may change the other aspects of the fit.

Checking the fit of your saddle can directly impact your ride and performance. Pay attention to signs that the fit may not be right, and you and your horse will be much happier and more comfortable in the long run.

WHAT ABOUT SWEAT MARKS?!

It is hard to discuss saddle fit without discussing sweat marks, which Merli recognizes can be a heated debate. It is true that uneven sweat marks can be an indicator of less-than-ideal saddle fit, but "looks" can be deceiving.

Sweat marks are apparent when you finish riding and remove the saddle and saddle pad. Sometimes you will notice that part of the horse's back is dry, and this may mean the saddle is causing a pressure point.

Let's say you bought a new horse but did not buy a new saddle or have your existing saddle fitted. One day after a ride, you notice there are uneven sweat marks along your horse's back, with varying dry spots. Good for you for noticing, but do not automatically conclude your saddle is the problem. It is possible that the previous owner's saddle was ill-fitting, and it may have permanently damaged the sweat glands.

The important thing to notice with your new horse or longtime partner is the new or changing sweat patterns. That is a clue you may want to call a qualified saddle fitter to examine the fit of your saddle to your horse.

About Patty Merli: Prior to becoming a saddle fitter, Merli was a competitive event rider and trainer who had spent a lifetime in the tack. Reconizing the importance of saddle fitting, she decided to direct her commitment to the sport to this and in 2008 traveled to Scotland to study saddle fitting. Learn more about Merli and her business at *www.pattymerlisaddles.com*.