

SADDLE FITTING MADE SIMPLE



HOW TO EVALUATE

Look at your horse as an individual and not a breed type.

Identify if there are any conformation issues to address.

COMMON MISTAKES

Arm yourself with knowledge to ensure your horse will have a pleasant riding experience.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Take these factors into account: your saddle pad, your horse's body condition, and how balanced you ride.

GET STARTED

Determining saddle fit is important to the comfort and safety of you and your horse. There are many things that affect the fit of the saddle.

Use this guide that explains the common problems we see and learn how to avoid them.

Let's do this!





THE GOAL OF SADDLE FITTING

Have the greatest amount of contact between the bar of the tree and the horse

Trees are designed for average horse conformations. There is no standardization in the industry for tree sizing of semi, full, draft, or gaited fit.

At Circle Y, we do our own research and tailor our trees based upon the hundreds of horses we individually fit each year. That's why you'll find many fits that work well on many types of horses.

The gullet measurement is important but the most misunderstood. It is NOT the defining factor of saddle fit and is only one aspect of fit.

Most importantly, not every saddle with the same gullet measurement will fit the same. The angle and twist of the bars affect how the saddle will fit.

FIRST EVALUATE

- Age and maturity of the horse
 - A saddle you buy for your two-year-old today may not fit as well when he fills out in another year or two
 - As a mature horse progresses into its senior years, changes in conformation can alter the fit of your existing saddle
- The body condition of the horse you are fitting
 - Significant weight gain or loss can alter the way a saddle fits
- Look at your horse as an individual and not a breed type
- Identify if there are any conformation issues to address



The way a saddle maker takes the gullet is on the bare tree without the leather. Note where the measurement is taken.



If you're looking to purchase a used saddle and the seller provides a gullet measurement, understand it will vary depending on where the measuring tape was held and is not the true gullet.



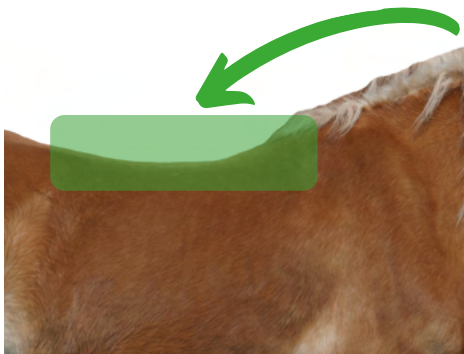
TREE FIT ILLUSTRATED

Good fit has the greatest amount of contact between the bar of the tree and the horse

The illustrations are a simplified view of the goal of saddle fitting: to achieve bar contact between the horse and the tree.

With good fit, the bar angle matches the angle of the horse for maximum contact and there is sufficient clearance between the horse's wither and the swell of the saddle.

When there is little bar contact and the pressure is concentrated in a particular place, the result can be pinching, rubbing, or white hairs. Note that pinching doesn't always mean the horse needs a wider fit - in fact, concentrated pinching often means the fit is TOO wide as seen in the Too Wide illustration.



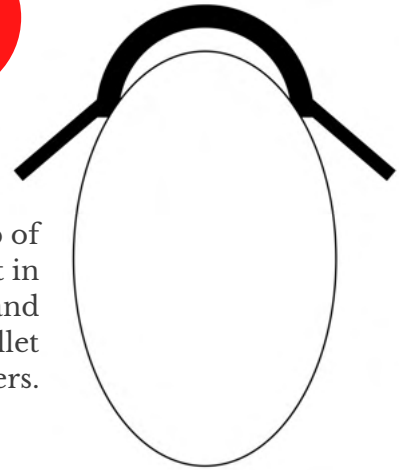
Helpful tip:
You're fitting about 9" of your horse's back - his height is irrelevant

Your horse's attitude under saddle can clue you in to a problem, but keep in mind that many a good horse will endure an ill-fitting saddle until the damage becomes unbearable before complaining. So be proactive in evaluating good saddle fit for your horse.



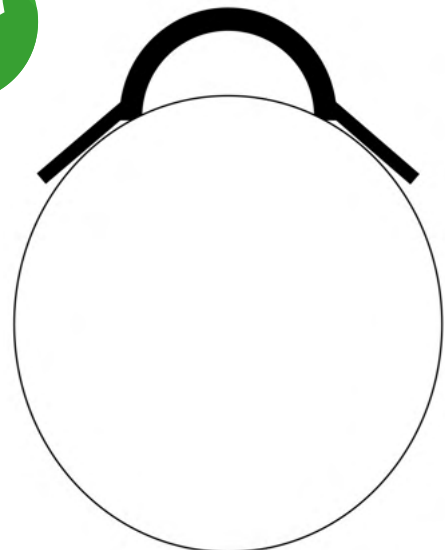
TREE TOO WIDE

Pinching at top of bars and no contact in the middle and bottom of bar. Gullet too low on withers.



GOOD FIT

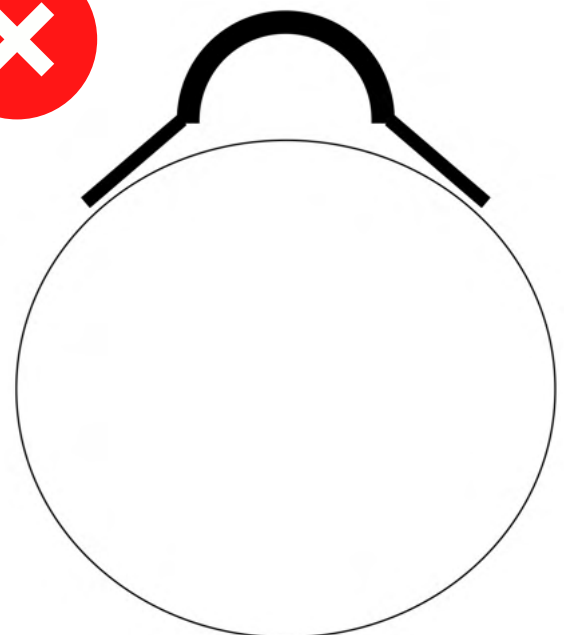
Even bar contact throughout and angle of the bar matches the horse.



TOO NARROW

No contact in middle and top of bars. Saddle not sitting down on the horse in the gullet.

You can't solve this problem with a pad because it makes the fit even worse.





DETERMINE YOUR TREE FIT

You're only fitting about 9" of the horse's back. Don't look at the horse's height - keep your eyes on his withers, shoulder, and topline. Specialized saddles are available for certain horse types. For example, gaited saddles allow more bar flare for the horse's shoulder action.



This mare is 15.3 hands with heavy bone structure, but she needs a Regular, or semi-Quarter horse, tree because of the defined wither.

REGULAR / SEMI

The average, defined wither will usually fit a Medium/Regular tree. This horse will have a more refined body with definition in the withers-the modern version of Quarter Horses, Tennessee Walking Horses, Thoroughbreds, etc.

WIDE / FULL QH

A more rounded, mutton wither with a flatter back will usually fit a Wide tree. This horse has a blocky build and often referred to as the "foundation" type.



EXTRA WIDE

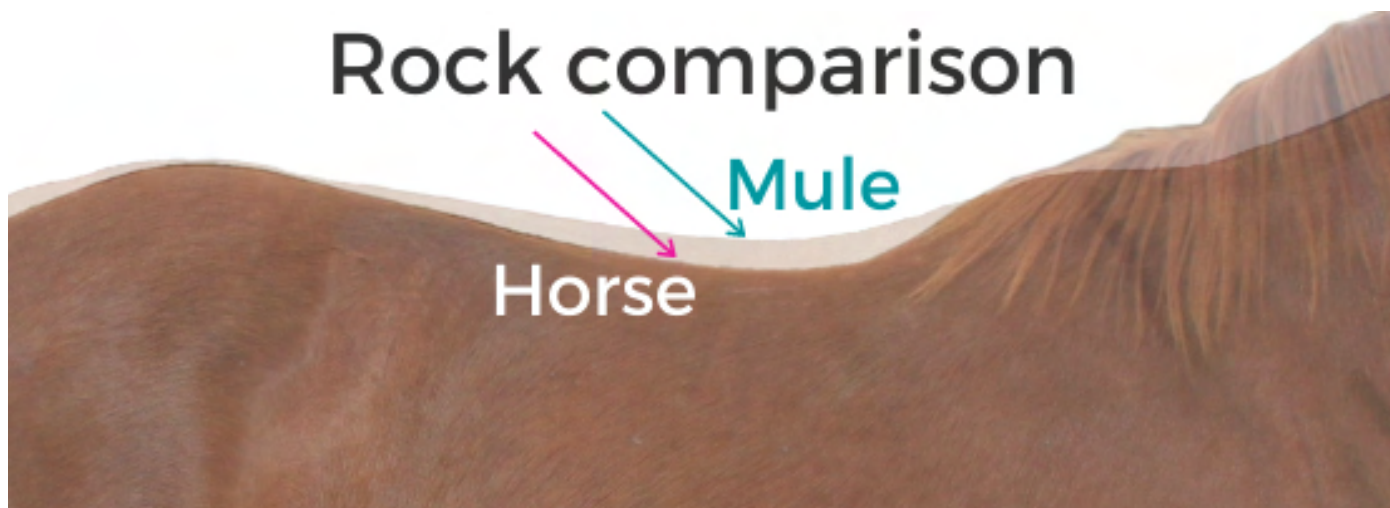
Draft horses and Draft horse crosses with a very wide, flat back and wither, will usually require a Draft or Extra Wide tree.

DID YOU KNOW?
We've fit drafts and draft crosses in a regular fit tree because they had defined withers. Tree fit is not determined by horse height.



DETERMINE YOUR TREE FIT

Rock comparison



If a tree with a lot of rock is placed on a mule with little or no rock, the tree actually will rock on the back from front to back, like a rocking chair.

Conversely, if you placed a mule tree on a typical horseback, the tree would bridge, meaning it would only make contact in the front and back of the bars and would float in the middle of the back.

DID YOU KNOW?

Circle Y's Flex2® tree fits mules well because of the slight give in the tree. You can choose regular, wide, or extra wide to fit a mule.

TREE ROCK

The rock is the contour of the bar of the tree, and the back of the horse or mule, from front to back.

The rock of a tree is important because if it doesn't match the conformation of the horse or mule, the saddle will not be able to distribute weight properly, will move around, and cause soreness.

The difference between a mule tree and a horse tree is in the "rock".

Typically, mules have a straight back with very little rock. They inherit this conformation trait from their donkey parent. Horses have more contour or sway in their back when compared to a mule.

Although most mules have a straighter back, some will inherit their back from the horse parent. Likewise, there are horses that have a straight, mule-like back.



COMMON ISSUES TO CORRECT

All saddle trees are built to fit average. If your horse's conformation is outside of average, he'll need a pad solution to create a better saddle fit.



SWAYBACK

A swayback causes “bridging” of the saddle. The bars only make contact in the front and rear of the saddle and will put excess pressure or rub the withers and loins. It can be seen in older horses, young and underdeveloped, and poorly conditioned horses. It is a common saddle fitting problem that can be remedied with the use of a bridge pad or swayback pad.

HOLLOWS

A very prominent, narrow wither may indicate the lack of muscle behind the shoulder blade, and the need for a shoulder bridge pad. The shoulder bridge pad fills in this “hollow” area, allowing the saddle bars to make better contact with the horse.



SWAYBACK & HOLLOWS

A swayback will cause the saddle to bridge, and hollows behind the scapula will require a shoulder bridge pad to fill in the gaps. Use a pad that fills both voids in the horse's back like a long shoulder bridge pad or a pad with several shim pockets.



This 20-year-old gelding has a significant sway back and prominent withers. Remedied with a shoulder bridge pad. Note the white spots from past ill-fitting saddle.



COMMON ISSUES TO CORRECT

All saddle trees are built to fit normal. If your horse's conformation is outside of normal, he'll need a pad solution to create a better saddle fit.



ASYMMETRY

A horse can have a shoulder that is larger on one side than the other. This will cause the saddle to pull to the weaker side. To correct, fit the widest shoulder and use a shim pad to fill in the weaker side. This often happens when a horse is exercised more in one direction (the easier side) than the other.

DOWNHILL

Higher haunches, or the horse built “downhill”, can allow the saddle to put more pressure on the withers and may require a pad that is built up in the wither area.



TOPLINE

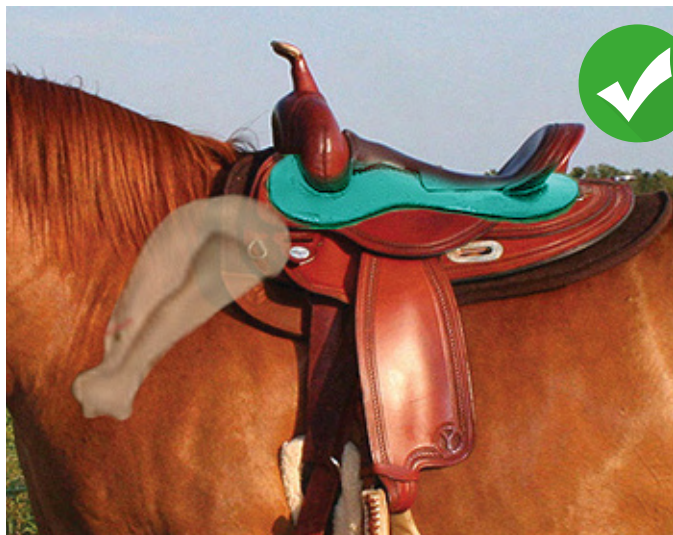
A level topline, wither and croup being about the same height, is ideal.

For a prominent spine, a spine relief pad is needed. A short backed horse will require a saddle with short bars/skirts.



SADDLE PLACEMENT

Great saddle fit is identified when the saddle is level and there is adequate gullet clearance. Make sure your saddle is positioned correctly with the front bars of the tree behind the horse's shoulder blades.



CORRECT

The front of the tree bar should be just behind the scapula. Step back and look at the saddle on the horse's back. The saddle should be level. If the saddle is not level, you can try adjusting it by using shims, sliding it forward or back to raise or lower the front, or trying different rigging positions. When all else fails, you may need a different saddle with a better fit.

INCORRECT

Placing the saddle too far forward over the scapula can cause unnecessary rubbing and pressure (white spots). The pad and the saddle skirt can cover the back of the scapula but the tree bars must be behind the shoulder blade. If the saddle is placed too far forward, it will often travel to the sweet spot.



CHECK YOUR SADDLE PAD

You can tell by the hair, dirt, or wear marks where the most pressure is on the horse.

Is most of the wear in the middle, and none on the ends? The saddle may be rocking-excessive rocking can be corrected with pads or shims.

Is the middle of the pad under the bar not as dirty or compressed as the ends? That could be an indication of bridging. If you think there is even a chance there is any bridging (pressure at the front and back of the bars) it is best to correct with a shim or bridge pad in the center of the bars to correct the problem.



CHECK SADDLE ON THE HORSE

Make sure your saddle is positioned correctly with the bars of the tree behind the horse's shoulder blades.



TOO WIDE

Do this WITHOUT a pad - if the front of the saddle is resting on your horse's withers or if there is only room for one finger between the withers and the gullet, that's a good sign the saddle is too wide and a narrower tree is needed to distribute the rider's weight.

TOO NARROW

Do this WITHOUT a pad - if the front of the saddle is perched up on the horse's withers, that's a good indicator the saddle is too narrow and a wider tree is needed.



Sweat patterns from a bridging saddle. The saddle bars put pressure at the front and rear only and not down the middle creating pressure points against the horse.

Serious damage and soreness will occur. A bridge pad is needed to fill the gap between the horse's back and tree bars to distribute the rider's weight.

SWEAT MARKS

Sweat patterns can give an indication of how the saddle fits. Ideally, the sweat pattern will be even, without dry areas that indicate pressure points, areas where the hair has been rubbed off, ruffled hair or swirl marks that indicate excessive movement. Damage from past saddle fit issues can cause areas of dry spots or white marks. Ask yourself: has this horse ever sweated there before? Is my brand new wool pad doing its job and soaking up the sweat?



COMMON MISTAKES



FRONT CINCH

Do not over-tighten the cinch because it will create more pressure before you sit in the saddle. Especially, do not overtighten the cinch to compensate for a saddle that rolls. Make sure the saddle correctly fits the horse.

Try a different saddle pad (make sure you aren't over-padding), use a wider cinch, neoprene cinch, or flank cinch to help secure the saddle. The front cinch should be about as tight as your belt - if it's comfortable for you, it should be comfortable for your horse. This rule of thumb applies to general riding, not roping or dragging. Use discretion.

FLANK CINCH

Most people use the flank (rear) cinch incorrectly. It provides stability to the saddle and should be snug (not tight) against the horse. A rule of thumb is to be able to slip two fingers between the flank and the horse at the apex of the belly. It should not be loose or hang below the horse's belly-a loose flank cinch is a danger to horse and rider. Always use the connecting strap between the front and rear cinches to position the flank cinch properly and prevent it from becoming a "bucking strap".

If the back of your saddle is moving side to side or up and down at the walk, trot, or canter, the movement can cause a scrubbing action, irritating the skin (white spots). Use a flank cinch.



OVER PADDING

Don't over pad your horse. The more pads you use, the wider it makes your horse, and the higher your saddle will sit on the horse's back (saddle will roll easier, more leverage being higher). Excess padding will not allow you to feel the horse's movement as well.

If you are riding for extended periods, you need a pad to absorb sweat and dissipate heat. Natural fiber pads and blankets are more breathable and comfortable for your horse. Wool is an ideal example of natural moisture-wicking and shock-absorbing properties. Don't use a neoprene pad on a long trail ride-it doesn't breathe or absorb moisture, and white spots, rubbing, and pulling of the hair follicles can occur. Neoprene is a shock-absorbing material and is great for performance horses that will not have a pad on all day.

DIRTY GEAR & HORSE

Keep your horse's back clean-dirt is abrasive. The movement of the horse and the rider creates movement of the saddle. The abrasiveness and movement causes skin irritation. Your horse's back should be cleaned, brushed, vacuumed or washed before and after riding to remove sweat and dirt.

Keep your blankets, pad, and cinch clean.



COMMON MISTAKES



RIDER BALANCE

Consider how you sit in the saddle. For the tree to function, you must sit balanced. If you sit in the saddle like a recliner with your legs out in front, you exert twice as much force on the back of the bars and dig the bars into the horse's loins. The rider must sit in a balanced position, vertically with your legs under you. This position allows the bars of the tree to function properly and spread pressure equally front to back. Heavy riders require the tree to distribute more pounds per square inch on the horse. For this reason, proper saddle fit and equitation are critical with a heavy rider.

CONDITIONING

A horse is no different from a human athlete; horses get sore muscles when they are not in shape. Long trail rides, once a month barrel races, or competitions when a horse is not in the proper condition will make a horse's back sore. When pressure is applied to an unconditioned horse's back, swelling will occur which will accentuate or create saddle fit issues. If you feel heat or swelling after long or strenuous use of your horse, let his back rest and heal.

Do not jump to the conclusion that your saddle does not fit if you find your horse's back is sore due to being in poor condition. A horse's back will drop when it is not in condition or is overweight. When this happens, bridging of the saddle tree can occur. Strong abdominal muscles support and straighten the back of both the horse and the rider. Daily riding and conditioning will keep your horse's back tough and strong.

FITTING THE RIDER

DISCIPLINE

How will the saddle be used? Do you plan to rope, trail ride, barrel race, etc.? For example, a roping saddle needs to be built strong enough to withstand tremendous torque, but if you are trail riding, lightweight comfort will be more important.

DECIDE SEAT SIZE

Rider preference for saddle size varies-some like a larger seat, some a smaller seat, and discipline plays a role. In general, you should have 4" between the front of your body and the swell of the saddle. Your backside should rest at the base of the cantle, but not be pressing against the back of the cantle.

A slightly larger seat is better than too small. When sitting in the saddle, your thighs should not touch the back of the swell because it can be uncomfortable. If you have long legs, try a larger seat size so your knees (long thighs) don't hang off the front of the fenders.

When buying a saddle, adjust the stirrups to the proper length so you can assess the seat feel and the saddle balance correctly.

Arm yourself with information, talk to your retailer, professional, or the saddle maker for information about the saddle you're interested in. We'd love to talk with you about fit. Give us a call at 800-531-3600. Go and enjoy your horse!