

Saddle Fit for the Gaited Horse

Does your horse swish his tail or pin his ears every time you cinch or mount up? Does he dance around, throw his head high or even “lighten” on the front? This often is not just bad manners, but could be because he’s telling you that the saddle you love so much just doesn’t fit *him*. You may love it because it looks nice, has a nice padded seat, silver Conchos, or fits your behind so well. Whatever the reason, we need to **“fit the horse first”** when it comes to saddles. We can always add a padded sheepskin cover or a gel seat to increase our comfort, but often people think if they have a thick saddle pad, the horse shouldn’t complain.

Over the years it has become more and more apparent to me that a well-fitting saddle is as critical for the correctly gaiting horse as proper fitting athletic shoes are to the long distance runner. I don’t blame people for buying only what they can afford and I realize it’s not always easy to try a bunch of different saddles to find the perfect fit for your horse. I also realize that about the time you do find a great fitting saddle, your horse changes shape by gaining or losing weight, filling out, etc. So let me state right up front “there is NO magic bullet”; no perfect solution for all your saddle fit issues. But many, many people can help their horse’s comfort by spending a little effort to properly fit the saddle, and worry less about paying for expensive farrier services to alter or correct their horse’s gait every couple of months.

Its trial and error for most of us, but with a little bit of research, a lot of eyeballing and measuring, and watching how other saddles sit on different horse shapes, hopefully gives us an awareness of the pitfalls and help us help our equine partners be as comfortable under the saddle (and our weight) as we hope to be on top of the saddle.

The most critical fit issues, in my opinion, are

- bridging;
- weight focused too far back on the weak area of the spine,
- pinching in the wither/shoulders.

I often see horses bearing saddles that have all these problems areas relating to each other in a complete lack of fit for the horse. Please understand that our gaited horses are very unique in their need to move each quadrant of their bodies in singular freedom. Each leg (and the hip or shoulder that supports it) must lift, loft, travel, place and bear weight ***individually***. The spine must be able to bend not just vertically and horizontally, but laterally as well; with as much freedom as we can possibly allow and still ride the horse.

Bridging: Gaited horses often have very short “functional” backs, meaning less area for the saddle to comfortably distribute our weight. These shorter top-lines often include more curvature to the spine from the withers to the L.S. joint. When a saddle is too long and is flatter than your horse’s top line you get bridging where the rider’s weight becomes focused more on the front and back, and actually has a gap or weightless area directly beneath the rider. There is an easy comparison for those of us that have a naturally high arch to our feet; even if the rest of your shoe fits well, if there is no arch support it fatigues and eventually becomes very painful for

the arch to not have that support because as well as loads our weight onto either side of the arch. Yes, you can use wedge pads to fill the saddle gap, but they are a short term solution that will not make the saddle any shorter, and often leaves the rider's weight distributed heavily to the back of the saddle.

Weaker area of the back: the very area where our horses are weakest in their top line support is behind the last ribs and in front of the L.S. joint. This is precisely where saddles that do not accommodate the natural curvature of the spine will focus much of the rider's weight. This not only creates an uncomfortable fit for your horse, but places pressure in the very area that causes a horse to hollow his spine from the rider's weight. While this may not be a problem for gaited horses with a natural tendency to trot, such as the fox-trotter or the Saddlebred; for horses with a predisposition toward the pace, the hollow spine is a fundamental characteristic of the pacing horse. A poorly fitting saddle that weights and hollows the horse's spine will handicap your horse from correcting this gait and finding fluid easy-gait.

Pinching the withers/shoulders: likewise, the rider's weight resting on the withers is just as much of a problem "for any horse" as the weight too far back. The gaited horses also have tendencies toward wider rib spans and higher withers. You might be surprised at how many 15 hand horses actually do need an extra-wide tree for their freedom of movement. At the same time, the flare and angle of the gullet should fit the natural slope of the shoulders as much as humanly possible. Imagine having a hump or ridge in your shoe, and how uncomfortable even a small offset area will eventually become on your foot bed. This is why a good fitting slope, angle and gullet height is crucial to your horse... your weight is resting on that slope and the better it fits the natural build of the horse, the more evenly that weight is distributed and the more comfortable carrying the saddle and rider become for the horse.

Take a close look at your horse's naked back and pay particular attention if he has a highly ridged spine; this may require a saddle with more height between the panels. Does your horse have any noticeable roaching or serious sway to his topline? If so, you may need to accommodate those areas by utilizing shims for a better fit. Make sure you place your saddle correctly as well. When positioning the saddle, I place my hand on the horse's wither cap, place the saddle to where my hand is under the front gullet area fully, then snuggle back to the point where the weight is not on my hand. If your hand can freely cup the withers under the gullet, this is a great start. After cinching the saddle, you should be able to pretty easily push your hand back onto the wither cap and run it down toward the point of the shoulder unimpeded. If the saddle weight impinges onto this slope of the shoulder anywhere along that line, you have a fit problem. In the ideal fit there should be enough flare and gullet height for the saddle to be "over" the wither cap but never pushing on it.

If you just can't seem to find a good fit, or simply get the opportunity, try a [Port Lewis Impression Pad](#) to determine how your current saddle is fitting your horse. These pads utilize a putty consistency in a tough clear vinyl casing. Simply smooth out with a rolling pin and place between your horse and saddle. After a short, 20 minute, ride you can remove the saddle and see where any pressure point are pushing the putty out and where gaps allow it gather.

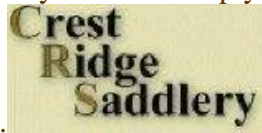
I frequently have people asking me what kind of saddles I recommend. While I do not “sell” saddles, and I’ve already outlined the criteria you want in looking to fit your horse, I will point out some features and brands that I have had particular success with. First let me list what I consider are critical features for a good saddle on any gaited horse:

- High and wide gullet with plenty of spine allowance between the panels. You NEVER want any weight on your horse's vertebrae; the panels should support all weight and keep it off the spine and withers.
- Enough flare and rocker to the panels to fit the curve of the horse and avoid bridging.
- Center rigging or double rigging to balance the saddle front-to-back; this will also help keep the gullet off of the withers.
- Equitation positioning of the stirrup leathers for a centered riding position to aid balance and independent seat.
- Rounded skirting: not just to free the hip movement, but also because a rounded skirt normally gets more upward lift which prevents the saddle from digging into the weak back area.

If your preferences run toward *English* style saddles, you might have guessed that I cannot recommend a cutback saddle for a loose, correct running-walk. Few are the gaited horses that can actually work well under them, IME. I heartily recommend **dressage saddles** for putting you in a centered riding position while allowing more freedom of movement for the horse. I’ve found that those dressage saddles without the extended “gussets” tend to fit better for the shorter backed gaited horses. I also look for nice flare and rocker in those panels. I’ve had tremendous success with the *older Stubben models, particularly the Tristan dressage saddle*. I tend to shop on line for these where I can find well maintained, quality pre-owned saddles at reasonable prices. While I like the air panel construction of the Wintec dressage saddles *in theory*, I have had a very difficult time utilizing them with the shorter backed horses because of their extended gusset design. Often I find a horse will really have difficulty rounding up under this saddle or even simply maintaining a neutral carriage that is needed for quality 4 beat gait. Larger horses with longer top lines seem to work OK with them. But if you have one of these and your horse is constantly demonstrating pace you might consider trying a different saddle.

If you prefer a *Western* style saddle, far and away I’ve had the most success with the **Crest Ridge Saddles; especially those with their J Bar tree** which they put in several of their gaited models. I particularly like these saddles used with their pack girth they call “**Trail Boz**” because it centers and balances the saddle so well. The Trail Boz girth also sets the girth in a center-fire position without the bulky “Y” latigo other similar riggings utilize. I’ve found this saddle has often improved the movement in those horses with nice curvature to their spine where other traditional stock horse saddles will bridge and pinch. I have, just once, tried out the **Freedom Saddle by Casa Dosa Tack** and found it also allowed great movement and balance with the horse. Both of these saddles have rounded skirting plus great gullet flare and height to accommodate the rolling shoulders. Both also place the rider in a centered equitation riding

posture rather than the chairseat position which will often encourage the rack or pace in many horses. [Crest Ridge Saddlery](#) carries a full line of saddles in a *wide range of prices* and by utilizing cordura under-skirting they make many of their models lighter and more affordable for the trail rider. They will also help you measure and analyze your horse for proper fit to the



appropriate tree.

A third option I like is what I call a modified or combination saddle. Tucker Saddles have a trail equitation saddle that has worked well for many gaited horses, but the key here is the "equitation". This is one of the few Tucker saddles I've found that positions the rider in proper balance and places the stirrups in a correct position. This saddle is primarily built on a western tree, but utilizes wide trail-type stirrups hung on English style leathers. It also does not have a horn, which is a plus with many pleasure riders but can be problematic for those who also want to show occasionally since it is not really a true western nor a true English saddle.

I have not claimed to have tried even a majority of the saddles out there. I don't think anyone can; all any of us can do is tell you where we've had our successes and frustrations. The important thing is to *make you aware* how critical a well fitting saddle is to your horse. We all know how miserable even slightly bad fitting shoes make us. Just imagine how uncomfortable a pinching or unbalanced saddle can be for your horse. So just remember that just because its labeled "gaited" does NOT mean it will automatically fit your gaited horse.

Look, measure and be smart about this very critical purchase. Overall, for a horse to gait well, they need comfort in their support structure. The better the saddle fits a horse, the more comfortable that horse will be carrying his load. I know people who spend a lot of money on gimmicks to get gait, and in my opinion those funds would be better spent on a quality structured saddle *that fits their horse*.

by Anita Howe, owner/trainer