

## Saddle Fit and Fitting From Three Perspectives: rider, body worker, and saddle fitter

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#### Saddle fit not just for sore backs – Holly Grayton (rider)

When DK Saddlery asked Alex and I to do a ‘Dare to Compare’ pitting their saddles against the ones we had at the time, I was excited! Alex was a bit skeptical to say the least.

At that time my horse Arthur was a lot to handle, and I didn’t do very much jumping practice at home because he would get quite hot. He also sticks his tongue out to the right and was difficult to turn left as a result... or so I thought.

His massage therapist had the usual concerns about sore back and that he wasn’t gaining muscle where she would like, but to be honest this was a bit of an old record for me with all the horses she has worked on that I’ve ridden over the years.

The day I tried the DK saddle, I warmed up a bit then started circling over a cavaletti – sure that he would be stiff to the left and get more and more wound up as we went. And it’s true, the first couple he did just that, but what was amazing was how after a couple circles he seemed to get softer and quieter, not become undone.

As part of the ‘Dare to Compare’ we put our old saddles back on and had a go at the same exercises. When I got back to the cavaletti on a circle it only took one circle before Arthur was getting stiffer and hotter, especially to the left.

Meanwhile Alex was having his own experiment. I couldn’t believe the information I was finding out with Arthur, and when I caught up with Alex he said we had to put the DK’s back on again after using ours to double check. Maybe starting in the DK was a benefit, maybe they were excited

from jumping by the time we used our old saddles, and so on. So we put the DK back on, and after a few minutes Alex rode over to say we absolutely had to get these saddles and I agreed. The horses went back to their relaxed state even after getting hotter and tighter in our old ones, as soon as they felt the DK again.

In the almost year since then, I have no trouble turning left – he is almost a symmetrical horse to ride. He is still a sensitive horse with a good engine but not the same. I practice at home a lot and I even wear spurs now.

Another interesting thing is that because the saddles are completely adjustable, my saddle for Arthur has been



expanded multiple times. He is about 3 inches wider than when we started, which I am told is a he change by both Danny at DK and Tina our massage therapist.

For me the biggest thing is a huge cost savings. If you could imagine I would have had to buy multiple saddles along the way to compensate for his back changing if my saddle wasn’t adjustable – or more likely I wouldn’t have bought a new saddle

every 2 months and his back would be constrained and sore.

My notes from Tina have changed tremendously and I hear much more positive changes to my horses body that are more in keeping with the hard work we put in.

I would have never thought my hot horse with a turning problem had anything to do with my saddle and turns out it fixed both!

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#### **A Saddle should only fit for three-six months – Tina Watkins EESTEEBW3 (body worker)**

As a body worker you get to know a horse's back, especially those that are in a very good program. The consistency and quality of a program is part of the reason that I can understand what has been happening with Holly's horse Arthur's tissue so well, and can give feedback about the changes. In this case we discuss the changes that Holly and her horse, Arthur, felt since changing to a DK saddle.

For some background on the initial conditions before switching saddles, Arthur's back always had soreness in the mid and upper back as a lot of working horses do. It is interesting to note that all along as we worked on the horse before the new saddle, the muscles would start to build and start to feel better but there was always a little nagging soreness in the wither pocket behind the shoulders and along the core tissue of the thorax. This horse had significant asymmetries, as a lot of performance horses do, and as the season wore on we often found that there was increasing postural changes that went with those asymmetries.

I was very excited to hear that Holly was going to switch to a DK saddle, especially to see what the air-filled panels would do to this horse's back. There was of course a transition period where we felt like the horse had changed a ton with the new situation, and because of this we had to get the saddle re-fit and opened up several times because the horse was gaining so much muscle. This is an excellent problem to have, and it does tell us that the other saddle was creating enough pressure that the horse was not able to build the muscle we wanted, even though the program that Holly has is very solid.

It was interesting to see that a horse in a good program was able to change so much and so quickly just by relieving pressure points. As a body worker I noticed immediately (even in his first massage since changing saddles) the big changes we were experiencing in the body, both in the development of muscle but also the range of motion found in the spine, shoulder and base of the neck. The sternum itself had much more mobility.

I am excited to note that this horse continues to change session after session and we continue to see that the muscle is developing. We are also seeing significant improvement in

the postural asymmetry in the shoulders and throughout the neck and back.

I am sure that many of you have heard or experienced the following situation before: get a different sitting saddle, but see basically no change in muscle growth. Now the performance of the horse might change for the better. This might be a three-month honeymoon period, where we have basically moved pressure points from one area to another – hence the improved performance from relieving previously sore spots. But any gains reported in one area might be mitigated by losses in new areas that now have pressure points.

In the case of Holly and Arthur, the horse's back continues to change. The muscles that lift the shoulder, sternum and the base of the neck all started to gain tissue and there was a better response in the range of motion. Holly reported noticing that

the horse is much easier to bring up off the forehand; the way that the upper ribs moved have increased and the ability of the horse to turn and gain collection are much easier.

I am thrilled to see such big changes in the last 11 months since changing to the DK saddle, and that Arthur has been easier and more willing to do the more collected exercises without any negative emotional response or pain that he once had.



#### **How I know your saddle doesn't fit – Danny Kroetch (saddle fitter)**

It was our pleasure to be invited by Holly and Alex Grayton over to Grayton Farms to do a 'Dare to compare' with the saddles they were using at the time and our DK saddles.

First on the agenda was to assess the horse Holly chose to use, which was her top jumping horse, Arthur.

Looking at his conformation I saw that he had deep shoulder holes with an extreme shark fin wither – these can be very difficult to fit. I then did palpation of his back to check for saddle fit soreness. When I do this I palpate the wither muscles, back muscles, as well as the spinal ligament.

I was not surprised at his extreme reaction, which confirmed he was 15/10 for soreness. In my experience this is always the case when wooden- or plastic-treed saddles are used, as these saddles all have short tree points. And unfortunately

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this makes up over 90% of the saddles on the market today.

There are a few things you should know about tree points and saddle fitting. The thoracic trapezius muscle is where the majority of tree points sit – about 3-4 inches down from the top of the wither – and they bear weight from the tree point. This muscle is oriented horizontally from the front to the back of the horse, rather than vertically as the weight coming through the tree point is directed, and therefore is simply not designed for weight bearing. Thus, we create friction against the grain of the muscle every time the horse moves.

Secondly, the trapezius muscle is where the shoulder blade/scapula rotates back with each step forward, increases in width by up to 5 inches across the whole body with each step. When the weight-bearing tree point is sitting there the range of motion of the shoulder is limited tremendously.

The DK tree points are longer, about 9 inches, which reaches down past the trapezius and onto the thoracic serratus muscle. The serratus muscle has a vertical orientation, and therefore makes it an ideal candidate for weight bearing from the tree. When you go below the shoulder blade for stability and support it truly frees the shoulder, allowing for full range of motion and has the potential for muscle growth.



Now, back to the ‘Dare to compare’

It only took a few moments until Arthur started to trust that this saddle wasn't going to cause him pain. He started to stretch, open his stride, swing through the back and use his hind-quarters better. Holly told us she was impressed with how light he was in her reins and how good he felt. Then after a short warm up she took a few fences.

Holly came back after she had jumped about 6 jumps wearing a big smile. She then admitted to us that Arthur would not normally turn left easily when landing off a jump he would get tight and she had always thought that was because he sticks his tongue out but in fact it was because his shoulders didn't

have the room to move. In this saddle there was no problem. The only way to free the shoulder is to have long enough tree points so that the base of stability is below the natural range of motion in the shoulder blade, leaving everything above the base of stability free to move.

To make it a fair comparison for both Holly and Arthur we took the DK off and put her normal saddle back on.

Immediately the difference was notable. Holly commented that Arthur became instantly heavier in the contact, and he didn't want to turn left on landing again.

So I am happy to report that on my next visit, six weeks later, their horses had zero soreness on palpation. I needed to open both trees as the horses had already built ¼ - ½ inches of muscle in their withers in this short time.

I have been back every 2-3 months since to adjust the saddles, and I am happy (but not surprised!) that all the horses at Grayton Farms now in DK saddles have continued to develop and improve their performance and are pain-free from saddles. Even a well fit saddle shouldn't fit longer than a 6 month period because of muscle development and change should render it obsolete. This is why it is imperative that horses have an adjustable

saddle as feed, age, work and metabolism can change their shape throughout their lives. As a comparison; if you were going to the gym regularly you wouldn't want your clothes to fit the same way after 6 months of hard work. You would hope to see new muscle definition all over your body and with a horse their back is the key to all the muscle groups from their hind end, core, and neck carriage.

I am pleased to note that Arthur has continued to develop, and he can no longer be described as a deep shoulder holed, shark-finned wither boy. His withers have filled in approximately 2 inches on each side and he is happy happy happy!