



What Causes a Saddle to Not Fit: Part Two

Janis Cook

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In the first article I explained why a gain or loss of weight can affect the fit of a saddle but there are other causes for a saddle that appeared to fit initially but over time doesn't fit the horse and the rider feels the change as well. Usually it takes 3 to 6 months to become noticeable and solutions appear as specialty girths and multiple pads, vet bills, therapy sessions, short lay offs until everyone finally agrees that the saddle is not fitting. This is the tricky part of the process because the Rep or Saddle Fitter now has to analyse why the saddle failed and what to do next.

In a young horse fitted at 3 or 4 (with the growth finishing around age 6 or 7), simple decisions regarding the width of the saddle should be made often during the growing stages. As the wither bones grow in the 5th to 6th year the wither will measure narrower than when the horse didn't have much of a wither at 3 or 4 years.

The front to back balance of the horse changes as the hind end and front end grow at different times. Fitting a young level backed horse with a thicker panel at the back of the saddle isn't a problem but if that back angle changes and the horse starts to rise from the base of the wither to the croup, we now have a pressure problem at the back of the saddle, and it could also be tipping the rider forward. Combine that with a tree that's too wide due to the withers also growing and the pommel drops onto the horse with a lot of pressure which equals unhappy horse and unhappy rider. The solution is to have the horse measured, adjust the tree width and change the panels. (Very few saddles offer these solutions for growing horses).

There is another cause of saddle fit failure which is far more detrimental to the horse and is what I have termed a saddle crisis. The symptoms are visible and include negative changes to the topline shape and obvious muscle atrophy, poor posture over the jumps or an inability to get the hind end under to optimize performance regardless of the riding discipline, for example dressage, reining, or jumping. Extreme tenderness in the back and withers, rearing, refusing jumps, inability to travel in a straight line, refusing to bend right or left (usually one way is worse than the other). In addition colic like symptoms after riding could have been occurring. At some point if the rider lets it get that far the horse will completely shut down, they literally can't fight the saddle any more. The poor posture the horse has resorted to as a way of compensating has now created a secondary problem to the joints, muscles and vertebrae both in the neck and back. This situation is not irreversible but it requires a working knowledge of tree design as it relates to the specific horse and a good 5 to 6 months of rebuilding topline and correcting posture. The saddle used during this process will need to be adjusted a few times to grow with the horse, in extreme cases we have delayed ordering the new saddle and work only with a fitting saddle until the horse is proven to be well again.



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This is a saddle failure of epic proportions and should never have occurred in the first place.. if the rider was advised to purchase the saddle, in my opinion that is a bigger travesty. Trying to make the same saddle work at this point is not possible.