

The Coolest Things I Learned About Saddle Fit

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• [The Winning Edge](#)

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The two-day introduction to saddle-fitting course offered plenty of hands-on demonstrations.

Photo: Alexandra Beckstett

A couple of weeks ago I attended a two-day, 16-hour introduction to saddle-fitting course put on by the U.K.-based Society of Master Saddlers. The timing was impeccable, as I've recently begun questioning my own saddle's fit as my young horse's body shape changes. During the course I learned not only the basics of determining a good- vs. an ill-fitting saddle, but also what a true science saddle fit is. Here are some of my favorite take-homes and coolest facts from the weekend:

1. Naturally, you don't want a saddle to sit any further back on a horse's spine than the T18 vertebrae (T17 in some Arabians)—this is the point of junction for the last rib. If the cantle rests beyond T18, the horse's kidneys and other internal organs bear the brunt of your weight, and that's setting your horse up for a host of discomfort. One saddle fitter in attendance works with gaited breeds and noted that some of them develop back soreness due to saddle seat riders' position sitting way back in the saddle. Another attendee noted a similar issue with some short-backed Western riding horses whose saddle skirts dig into their loins.
2. You also don't want a saddle to sit any further forward than two inches behind the horse's shoulder, or you might compromise his movement and cause discomfort. One presenter explained the dilemma he has with polo players who place their saddles right up on and over the scapula and withers so as to more easily swing their mallets under the horses' necks. He proposed coming up with a different saddle construction to meet that sport's needs.



Saddle trees come primarily in wood and metal or synthetic form.

Photo: Alexandra Beckstett

3. There was much discussion about saddle trees and their evolution. Trees used to be primarily wood-based with metal reinforcements. Today they're

increasingly synthetic, as plastic injection molding can pump out hundreds of light-weight trees a day vs. a couple of handcrafted wood trees. Some manufacturers are even moving toward fiberglass trees, which are extremely light and strong, but completely inflexible and might fracture over time. To combat the inflexibility issue, one company developed a carbon fiber model with an integrated heating element that allows a saddler to heat up the material and adjust its width at any time. Consensus among the saddle fitters in attendance was that this heating theory still needs some work.

4. A discussion about saddle trees isn't complete without mentioning treeless saddles. One saddler explained that while these are popular among her endurance and trail riding clientele, they might actually be doing more harm than good—and there's [science to back it](#). Rather than distributing pressure evenly across the horse's back, treeless saddles place all the rider's pressure right under his or her seat bones.

5. I also learned a lot about the importance of proper pads. Those fluffy, comfy-looking sheepskin pads, for instance, cause the front of the saddle to be narrower on the horse. And some stiff square pads can cause more sores and rubs than the saddle itself. I got to witness the effect of pad on saddle pressure firsthand with a Pliance saddle test system. A demonstration rider tried a few different saddles on her horse, added a gel pad here or a different square pad there, and put her horse through his paces while hooked up to the pressure assessment system. It was fascinating to see how a few minor pad adjustments could alter the pressure on a horse's back—for better and worse!



A dynamic pressure assessment system can help pinpoint areas of high pressure on the horse's back caused by saddle, pad(s), and/or rider.

Photo: Alexandra Beckstett

6. testing on the U.S. eventers' saddles just prior to this year's Rolex Three -Day Event, but there were no takers. The highest U.S. finisher on home And here's one of the most interesting things I heard: A team of master saddlers and an engineer worked closely with the British equestrian teams in the years prior to the 2012 Summer Olympics. They used the Pliance saddle test system to evaluate and correct saddle fit among all the disciplines. Need I remind you how the Brits absolutely dominated the equestrian events in that Olympics? "Say saddle fit only contributes to a 1-2% improvement in a horse's performance," said master saddler and course instructor Ian Hastilow. "That extra 2% improvement can make a huge difference at that level." The same team of saddlers offered to perform their Pliance pressure turf was fifth. Sure, maybe the British teams would have won medals and the Rolex placings would have remained unchanged regardless of the saddle fit tests, but it's certainly interesting to consider.