

# Many horses, but not so many Saddles

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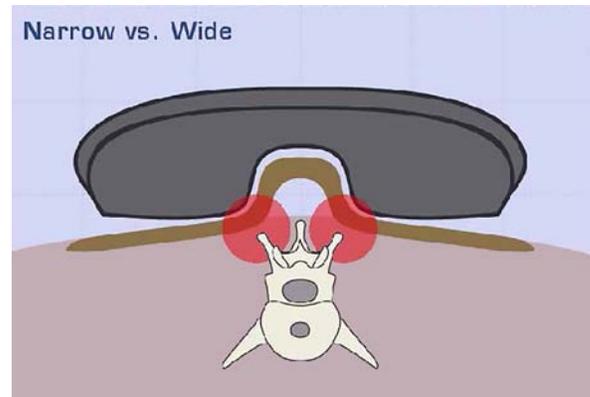
Obviously, ideally, it would be great to have a saddle that has been made and fitted for each horse's conformation, but the reality is that this will seldom be the case. So, you get a saddle that fits you absolutely wonderfully, is comfortable, works with your anatomical requirements (male or female), and makes sure that at the very least you won't let any discomfort from the rider's end translate down to the horse. That's the first step. Then, you have it fitted to the largest horse you have, because it's always easier to fill in the gaps and make it fit for horses with narrower shoulders, lower withers, etc. (just like it's easier to fit shoes that are too large with insoles and extra socks; the other way really doesn't work that well.)

The only issue may be that the saddle support area on a larger horse may be somewhat bigger than for a smaller horse – which is then difficult to accommodate – but for the panel size of the horse you size the saddle to fit your shortest-backed horse.

It's a compromise all around, but that is my suggestion. It's a workable compromise – while keeping in mind the fact that horses were never actually meant to be ridden! So let's look at the individual reference points concerning saddle fit and the why behind these suggestions.

Specifically for young horses, or 'remontes' as they are known in Germany, it can seem difficult to justify spending money on a custom saddle because they are definitely going to change. However – even this is somewhat counter-intuitive; if you have a saddle that is truly adjustable (not just by reflocking, but also in tree width and angle), you can accommodate your horses' changing conformation as he ages. Well-known clinician and veterinarian Dr. Gerd Heuschmann approached us with exactly this dilemma: he often trained very young horses and then sold them – and wanted a saddle that would work on several different body types at a time. So with his input we designed a "Remonte" saddle which has proven very effective for exactly this purpose. This is a saddle designed specialized for young horses, following the philosophy and the principles of the German cavalry hand and instruction book the "H Dv. 12 German Cavalry Manual: on the Training of Horse and Rider" written in 1932, and now available in English. (<https://www.amazon.com/H-Dv-German-Cavalry-Manual/dp/0933316518>)

I am a trainer with lots of horses to ride but I cannot afford a saddle for each horse. I start a lot of young horses – some of which will presumably leave within a year or two. How do I manage to do right by all these animals (and for myself) by ensuring I have and use a saddle which works for me and works for all of them?



Gullet width too narrow for horse



Conformational changes

Keep in mind that the horse will change its conformation most drastically between the ages of 3-5-8. Even a saddle which fits perfectly at age 3 – correct in tree width, tree angle, gullet width, and length – may no longer work at age 8. The withers have come up, the shoulders have come up and back – which effectively shortens the saddle support area (which is between the base of the withers and the 18th thoracic vertebra) and means that this saddle will now impinge on all sorts of reflex points, resulting in unwanted behaviour, such as bucking, stumbling, refusal to go forward, etc.

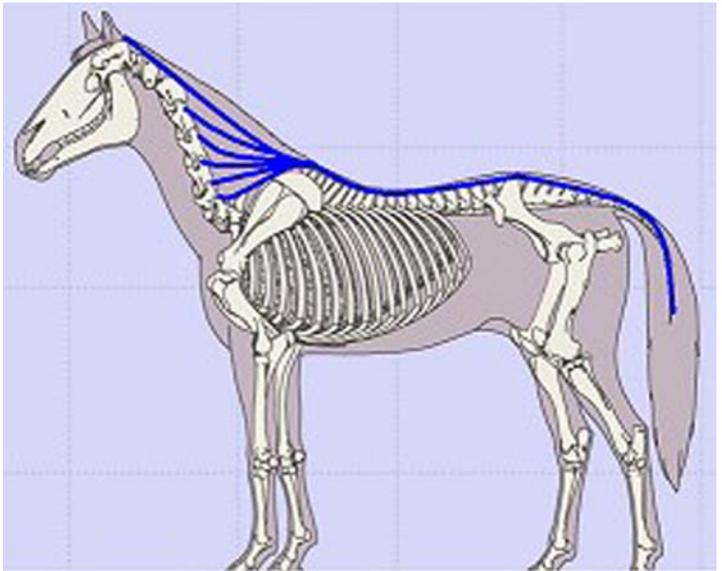
Conventional wisdom states that three years is the optimum age to be 'broken'. A horse should not really begin serious training until around age 5. By age 8 a well-trained horse's muscles and conformation should allow training to begin in earnest.

Concern for the back health and care for a young horse is very important – I don't think anyone would argue that point. Why then do we still hear, "When my young horse proves themselves I will get them a good saddle."? This is kind of like "When my child learns to play soccer properly I will get him a pair of running shoes that fit."

There is a correlation between poor saddle fit and tense/unhappy behaviour. Much of it is anecdotal, but after having seen 150,000+ horses in the 35+ years we have been in business, I think we can call ourselves educated experts. Your horse has two systems of suspension in its body which are not held firm by the skeleton of the horse. By changing the muscling and the horse's way of go-

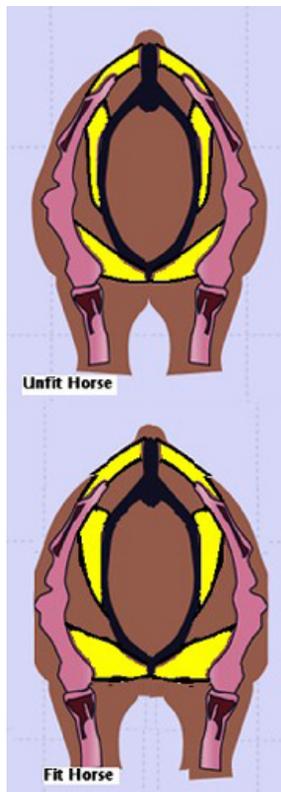
ing we can actually affect these two systems. Also, if we damage these systems we can permanently change a horse's movement and conformation.

The first system is the horse's spinal nuchal/ supraspinous ligament. This ligament runs all the way from the top of a horse's neck down the spine and into the tail. This ligament is extremely long and helps to hold the suspended frame of the horse. When the horse's neck and back lift, this ligament supports that collection and suspension. Now imagine putting a saddle on the young horse's back which is too narrow and pinches on this ligament system. To put it in perspective, if a piano player had the ligaments in the back of their hands rubbed continually for 45 minutes five days a week how supple do you think their hand would be? By the time the young horse is old enough to be ridden this spinal width is no longer going to change. Therefore this needs to be measured and the width between the panels of the saddle needs to be appropriate for the width of the spine and ligament. Pinching of this ligament can cause a dropped or swayed back and an unwillingness to bend.



*Spinal nuchal ligament system*

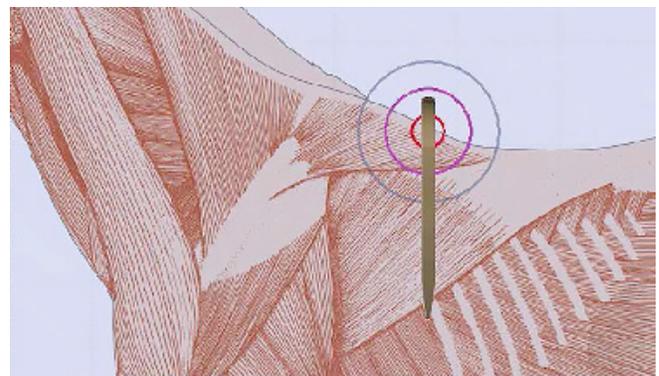
The second suspension system has a much larger effect on the conformation of the horse, especially the young horse. Horses do not have collar bones the way humans do. If you look at a cross-section of the horse's ribcage you will see the shoulder connected to the ribcage by muscles. (See below). In this picture, the muscles suspending the ribcage are in yellow. When we ride, we ask the horse to elevate its head, thereby shifting the centre of gravity further back. When this happens, the muscles (wither/trapezius, shoulder, and pectoral) will lift to support the ribcage. You can see the difference in the musculature between the fit horse and the unfit (or let's say young or unriden) horse. In our ridden horse the withers and ribcage are higher and the shoulders have more definition and are wider. From the side you will see how much further up and back the shoulder blade comes.



*Unfit versus fit horse*

If our saddle pinches on the muscles of the wither, the opposite development can result. If the trapezius muscle of the horse is pinched, the horse reflexively hollows the back, lifts the head and rotates the pelvis forward. (This is where the stallion bites to mare to get her to stand still during mating. So - if a young horse's saddle pinches here you have a contradictory indication for the horse. Although the rider's hands, seat and legs are telling the horse to engage and move, the saddle is telling the horse to stop and drop its back.

If a young horse is fitted properly through his development we can keep pain to a minimum and allow for positive development of muscle. A horse's back is not built to carry the weight of a rider (there is a 'safe spot' - the saddle support area - that can actually carry up to 250 pounds for up to 8 hours) and through proper fit we can keep the saddle from causing discomfort. A few things to remember are that a horse's growth plates close



*Pinching of the wither muscles*

from the ground (distally to top) up, finishing in the spine (where the saddle sits) when the horse is around six years old, no matter what breed the horse is. The behavior learned in the first year under saddle is behavior that he is going to demonstrate throughout his life. Horses, unlike dogs, which show specific behaviours towards individual people, do not specify their behavior specifically individually, so you really don't want to enforce bad habits - especially for a horse which may see multiple owners.

There has been no specific model of saddle that is perfect for the young horse until now, because though all breeds have basically the same skeletal and muscular systems, each one (and each individual!) has a slightly different conformation. That is why it is so important to work with a saddle fitter from the first day of riding to get something that fits properly. It is also imperative to have equipment that can be adapted to the horse as the angles of the shoulder and wither change through uphill development. There are some DIY (do it yourself) saddles on the market with interchangeable gullet plates, but these will only change the tree angle, and not the very important width! A young horse should be fitted at least once every six months in order to ensure that the saddle is still fitting properly through his changes in shape. If you want your child to be able to score the winning goal then they need good equipment. If you want your young horse to succeed in a positive training environment they need equipment that fits as well.