Does Your Saddle Fit Your Horse?

**Your horse will tell you.**
- Does your horse drop his back when being groomed?
- Does your horse have white hairs, bumps, open sores in the area of saddle contact?
- Does he become agitated, swish his tail, paw the ground, pin his ears, or try to bite when you tack up?
- Does he stumble under saddle, yet is sure footed without the saddle?
- Does he take small steps and not move forward well under saddle, yet moves beautifully in the pasture?
- Does he constantly favor one lead over the other? Refuse jumps? Toss his head?
(All answers should be “no”.)

**Things You Can Observe:**
- Can you fit 2-3 fingers vertically between your horse’s backbone and the inside of the pommel?
- Is the cantle 3/4” to 1” higher than the pommel?
- Does daylight filter through the gullet? (Channel between the panels)
- Is the front of your saddle parallel with the shape of your horse?
- Is the girth at least 1 hand behind the elbow?
- Does the weight bearing surface of your saddle fall behind the shoulder and in front of the last rib?
- Does the saddle sit well in the natural saddle pocket without rocking or bridging?
- After riding, is your saddle pad evenly sweaty under the panels?
(All answers should be “Yes”.)
How to draw a Diagram of Your Horse’s Back

What you will need: large sheet of paper • masking tape • 15” of Romex electrical cable (or a flexible rule) • felt tip marker • small ruler • carpenter’s level

1. Place saddle in proper position on horse’s back with no pad, no girth. The points of the tree, located at the “saddle nails” should be 4 fingers behind the bulge of the shoulder muscle. Apply tape on horse’s spine between the 2 saddle nails.

2. If measuring without a saddle, measure 4 fingers width behind the shoulder muscle and place tape on spine at this point. (Hint: Place left hand, fingers up, on horse’s left shoulder. Slide hand toward rear. When pinky finger drops off rear edge of shoulder muscle - stop. Follow index finger to horse’s spine.) Place 1st piece of tape here. (see photo A)

3. Measure 7” behind first piece of tape and apply a second piece in similar manner to the first piece. Then measure another 7” and apply a third piece. You will have 3 pieces of tape on your horse’s spine about 7” apart. (see photo A)

4. Mark the center of your Romex cable or flexible rule. Now mark ends with L and R indicating “right” and “left”. Place the center on horse’s spine and R on the right side of the horse. Bend and shape it to your horse’s back at the first piece of tape (see photo B1). Carefully lift the cable to maintain the shape. Trace the bottom edge onto large sheet of paper, placing the center on the dotted vertical line labeled “spine” and the R on the right side. Do the same at the other two pieces of tape.(see photos B and F)

5. Next determine “level”. Place one end of carpenter’s level at the most forward mark (1). Balance the bubble. Use your fingers to determine the distance between your horse’s back and the bottom edge of the level. (see photo D) Remember this distance.

6. Straighten your cable and reshape it along the horse’s spine. Using your felt tip marker or tape, mark the wire at the location of each of the pieces of tape.

7. Finally, place the “wither end” to the left on the “level line” of your sheet of paper at “1”. Being careful to maintain its shape, swivel the “rump end” until the distance between the cable and the level line at “3” equals at the same amount of fingers that you observed in step 5 (see photos D and E)

8. Trace this line. Mark the location of tape on the horse’s back at “2”. You are finished and your completed diagram should look something like photo F.
Helpful Photos:
All photos should be focused and have good contrast. Include entire barrel of horse. Horse should be standing square on flat ground. (Blurry, dimly lit pictures in which the horse is too close or too far from the camera are not helpful.)
<p>| Horse’s Name: |  |
| Breed: |  |
| Gender: | Age: | Hands: | Weight: |  |
| Length of usable back: |  |
| Training level: Frequency + duration of riding |  |
| Injuries and illnesses, if any: |  |</p>
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How to Determine Usable Back

Measure 4 fingers behind the shoulder muscle and place a small piece of tape at spine above this point. Then find the last rib. If your horse is lean, you may be able to feel it. If not, notice the direction of hair growth - downwards over the ribs, forward and down over the hips - forming a triangle and swirl of hair. The point of the triangle is at back edge of the ribs. Follow upwards and place another piece of tape on the spine. Using a yard stick, measure the distance between these two pieces of tape in a straight line. This is your horse’s usable back. Weight bearing portion of the saddle should not extend beyond these points. Saddle fitting cannot correct for inadequate back length. You simply cannot put a 19” saddle on a horse with a 16” back. Correct saddle fit begins with selecting a horse with enough back length to carry a saddle that fits the rider.

Hints for Hard-to-Fit Horses

If your horse really rounds up while working, try this to get a more accurate topline while he is standing in crossbies: Don’t try to draw this -- you will only have a few seconds. Have a friend photograph your horse while you “lift” the horse with your fingertips by firmly poking your fingers or tickling your horse’s belly just behind his sternum. Most horses will lift their backs in response to this touch.

If your horse is short backed, downhill and has no room for a carpenter’s level, place one end of the level on the rump and hold the other end near the withers. Balance the bubble and determine “finger distance” between horse’s back at both 1 and 3. Then draw your diagram by placing your shaped cable the same number of fingers from the "level" line at 1 and 3.

Most horses have the lowest portion of their back at, or near, the middle piece of tape. If your horse is different, an additional tracing drawn at the low point will give us more information for greater accuracy. Be sure to indicate distance from the middle measurement.

This saddle fitting guide is intended to give you the basics of evaluating the fit of your saddle and drawing back diagrams. It is adequate for most horses. However, it is a 2-dimensional drawing of a 3-dimensional animal. It is also static measurements done while your horse is standing still. It does not replace the services of a trained saddle fitter who can evaluate fit in person.