

Ask *not* what your horse can do for *you*, rather ask what *you* can do for your horse....

I spend a good deal of my time writing about the way horses are affected by the saddles they wear and the riders who sit in the saddles they wear. Therefore, these topics occupy my mind quite a lot.

As I sat here thinking about how to answer a particular email that was asking how easy BALANCE saddles are to ride in, it occurred to me that there is an underlying issue here that no-one ever seems to talk about.

This issue is...what does it take for a rider to make use of a saddle that has, in itself, the least likelihood of restricting natural patterns of movement in the horse and the least likelihood of causing discomfort?

I know that we (BALANCE) can provide an individual horse with a saddle that is designed and also 'fitted' in such a way as to be as neutral and innocent as is possible in its impact on that horse. However, the one thing we have no control over is whether the rider is willing and/or able to make use of such a saddle.

'Safe' Saddling does not equal 'Good' Saddling!

OK.....if that statement surprises you.....let me explain what I mean. **Traditionally designed & fitted** English saddles, Western Saddles, Australian Stock saddles and some of the 'treeless' but highly upholstered saddles, bear the hallmarks of what I would call Safe Saddling! The principles behind the way these saddles are designed and fitted to the horse, try to cater to the horse's needs only so far as they are not too challenging to the rider. Let me give you some examples of 'safe' saddle design and fitting principles:

- ⊗ In saddles with trees, the trees tend to resemble an inverted V shape, which is not the shape of a healthy, well muscled horse, but is less of a challenge for riders to sit astride than the open, inverted U shape, that is sympathetic to the natural, healthy shape of a horse.
- ⊗ The width of the tree used is usually chosen to provide significant clearance over the horse's withers, again minimising the stretch for the rider. More importantly, the excessive clearance has to allow for

the fact that traditionally fitted saddles (too narrow for the shape of the horse in movement) will put considerable pressure onto and into the muscles that it sits on. This compresses and inhibits normal blood flow, to the point where after even only 10 to 15 minutes of use, the horse will measure narrower and the saddle will be sitting lower! After an hour or so, the saddle can be sitting much lower, so you can see why it has seemed important to have the dreaded "3 or 4 fingers of clearance" over the withers when you first put the saddle on!



- ⊗ Saddles that are built to hold the rider in place on the top and fitted snugly onto (or perhaps I should say into) the structures and tissues of the horse's body, tend to have the rider's security as a priority. **NO MATTER HOW BADLY THEY RIDE!** To give you an example; Western Saddles and Australian Stock saddles were 'born' out of the needs of riders who were often having to spend many hours in a day (and night) in the saddle. The riders wanted to be able to take little to no responsibility for their own balance, poise and co-ordination without falling off the saddle. In the US, where cattle reigned supreme, the saddles had to be designed and fitted in such a way to the horse that it turned him into the equivalent of a bulldozer, when roping cattle. So the saddle had to be clamped so tight to his body that even with the force and weight of a large steer on the end of a rope, attached to the saddle, the saddle itself would not budge.

The only way to provide a rider with a saddle that does these jobs is to pretty much ignore the horse's needs entirely. One has to accept that any horse wearing such a saddle will have to learn to use his body in an entirely unnatural way, and many do. In fact there are some clear patterns of posture, movement and muscle development that identify horses that have to regularly work in these types of saddle. The very fact that horses can and frequently are, trained to tolerate and adapt to, many forms of restriction and discomfort, makes them highly vulnerable when brought into the world of humans. This places a huge burden of responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the humans who have influence on their welfare.

Perhaps this is something that needs to be discussed more honestly and openly when a saddle fitter is called in to supply a suitable saddle. The question needs to be asked. **What is the rider willing and able to do to allow the saddle fitter to concentrate on the horse's needs as a priority?**

The ideal scenario and one that any self respecting horse would vote for.....is one where the rider has sufficient knowledge of equine bio-mechanics to have a good idea of what will support the horse and what will interfere with him.

This imaginary rider will have committed time and effort into becoming fit, athletic, co-ordinated and well balanced BEFORE THEY GET ON A HORSE, in order to be a considerate and supportive partner for any horse they then go on to ride. In addition to this, the rider will:-

- ☺ want the horse to be as unrestricted as possible by the saddle, in order that it can be comfortable and athletic!
- ☺ appreciate that if the saddle does not respect the horse's structures and bio-mechanics it will be affecting that horse's movement, soundness, general health, attitude to work and performance.
- ☺ take responsibility for their own balance and co-ordination and therefore, will not want or require a saddle that sacrifices the horse's needs, in order to cover up or override instability in their own body, or lack of skill in their riding technique.
- ☺ understand that whatever equine activity they are involved in, from basic Trail Riding to Grand Prix Dressage or Three Day Eventing, in order to carry the weight of a rider, the horse needs to be ridden in a supportive, dynamic and positive way in which the quality of engagement and an adequate level of collection is required.



- ☺ be willing therefore, to learn the skills required to ride her horse in an educated and supportive way.

What this rider and this horse will need by way of a saddle is something relatively simple in its construction and *generally* classified as 'English' in style.

It will not hold the rider into a specific position, but neither will it make it difficult for her to organise her body into a state of energetic poise. Therefore, the seat will have its deepest point towards its centre and the stirrup bars set in the correct position to allow a balanced seat. This will be slightly further forward for riders who need to adopt a forward or half seat for jumping compared to the position of the bars for Dressage, which tend to be further back to allow correct alignment of the feet under the pelvis.

The tree/panel length will, ideally, need to be no longer than the distance between the position of the back of the shoulder blade when rotated back (leg extended forward) and the last rib.

It will, in and of itself, have as little influence on the horse as possible in terms of mechanical interference or in the stimulation of reflex points along the back. In other words it will remain as innocent as possible in its role as an interface between the structures and movement of the rider and the horse. In order to be as neutral as possible, the saddle must also have a quality of stability, so this must be taken into consideration when determining the width, the padding quantity and materials used.

In order to do this, the saddle will have to be of a shape and size that is not an exact match for the horse's static back profile.....rather it needs to allow for a widening of the back that happens as he engages the power of his hind quarters correctly into a lifting of the fore quarters. It also needs to be wide enough to accommodate some form of yielding pad between it and the horse that will increase comfort and even out the small but rapid changes in shape that are constantly going on between the underside of the saddle and the horse's back.



To make use of a saddle that is designed and 'fitted' in this way, the rider has to take some responsibility for keeping it stable on the horse's back,

because it is not fixed onto the back in the way many traditionally shaped and fitted saddles are.

For example; a rider that has a good core stability of their own and good body awareness, can usually provide their horse with a saddle that is roomier and has a deeper/softer layering of cushioning underneath. A rider who is sloppy or un-co-ordinated will feel very unstable to the horse if bobbling around on top of the same saddle and pad combination. Everything will be on the move and most horses find this really difficult and will often end up bracing their own bodies in order to control the excessive and unbalancing movement on their backs.

The good rider will make sure she has a padding system that is adjustable in order to fine tune the way the saddle is working, depending on the horse's current fitness, muscle development and posture, which she knows may change, depending on what is going on in his training schedule and general environment.



So, this ideal scenario is about the best you are going to get in terms of taking care of the ridden horse's health, soundness and well-being and therefore the horse is likely to be allowed a saddle that fulfils all the criteria above.

In reality, traditional saddle fitting methods and the majority of traditionally designed and sized saddles cannot fulfil the criteria, so the rider will need to be open to exploring what (unfortunately) are still often described as '**alternative saddling methods**'. The **BALANCE Saddling System** is often described in this way, despite the fact that we believe that this approach is what all horses deserve, so should be the standard method.

Should the tree stay or go?



The popularity of tree-less saddles has been explosive, and it is easy to understand why and how. There is no getting away from the fact that when a saddle is built on a tree that is not as wide as the horse it is used on, that saddle will cause damage. However, this does not make the concept of having some solid structure within the saddle wrong. Indeed, the development of

saddles that were more than soft pads of animal skins or similar, came about through a recognition that their use between horse and the load he carried, be that a human or baskets of rocks, was not enough and that this padding had to be combined with something more rigid that would spread that load over a wider and longer surface area.

As in so many situations, we humans are masters at knee-jerk reactions that throw the proverbial baby out with the bath-water!

There is no doubt that in terms of reduced discomfort alone, there are lots of horses who are better off in a treeless saddle than a badly fitted saddle with a tree, so I am not knocking treeless saddles per-se, but I do challenge the idea that this is the ultimate in saddle design, because I do not believe, from what we see in the course of our work, that it is.

People who want their horses to be strong, dynamic, co-ordinated and really athletic, despite the influence of the rider's weight, will recognise the value of a saddle that has some solid structure within it, because this provides the horse with kinaesthetic feedback that he can interact with. In other words to keep his central nervous system alive and responsive, he needs to feel changes in pressure, and changes in balance. If the saddle he wears is too mushy and has no structure, there is little or no differentiation in the feels he gets between himself and his rider. Some may think that this is a good thing, but in terms of helping him to be an athletic partner, it is not.

In our opinion, there are occasions when a treeless saddle might be an appropriate, long-term option. However, we believe the following combination of factors are necessary:-

- The horse has a good, healthy, well muscled back. So no prominent withers, shoulder blades or spinoous processes.
- The horse's posture through the back is strong and able to lift and carry a rider. Dropped/sway backs are not helped by treeless saddles.
- The rider is light in weight, very well co-ordinated and very well balanced.
- The rider only rides for short periods at a time.
- The rider can ride without putting the majority of her weight into the stirrups at any of the paces.

Where these criteria are met, a treeless saddle can work OK, but from our experience of the decline in standards of riding and horse health/fitness,

there are unfortunately, not very many horse/rider combinations that fit into this list.

In summary:

Establishing what the rider expects from a saddle is an important part of supplying a saddle that will work for the horse and that the rider will be willing and able to use. One has to find the balance between what the horse needs and what the rider is capable of and willing to do.

We (BALANCE) can certainly supply a saddle that we know is going to work for the horse, but if the rider finds it too challenging to ride in, it will sit in the tack room and do the horse no good at all.



Therefore, we do have to be willing to accept *some* of the limitations of the rider, in order to help the horse. However, we tend to draw the proverbial line much closer to where the horse is standing than the rider, so there are times when we will actually decline to supply a particular horse/rider combination with a saddle. Not because we can't equip the horse with what it needs, but because we know that it is likely to ask more of the rider than they are willing to give.

Riders who don't feel able or willing to be the kind of rider that their horse would choose as an ideal partner, already have access to any number of saddle fitters and suppliers who are willing to set aside the horse's needs and pander to the riders wants, in order to make a sale.

By the way, we have seen a good number of what would be called novice riders, who have better balance and co-ordination than many professional riders, so actual experience in itself is not always a good guide as to how well someone rides.

When someone is keen to tell you that they have had 20 years of riding experience, keep in mind that it could be that they have had 20 years experience of riding very badly, so don't automatically assume that a saddle that is good for the horse can only be ridden in by experienced riders! In fact we have several riding schools who have equipped all of their horses with BALANCE saddles in order to protect their backs. Beginner riders (children and adults) at these establishments know nothing other than saddles that are wide and well padded.

The BALANCE organisation will not automatically sell one of our saddles to anyone, and this is one of the things that make us different. Some may call it stubborn, we call it sticking to our principles and our principles are founded on respect and consideration for the horse. We sometimes work with people to help them use a non-BALANCE saddle of a good design and width to create a modified version of the BALANCE Saddling System to get them moving forward along this path. There are a small, but increasing number of saddle companies that are headed by people with similar ideals, which is really heartening to see. I hope more and more riders will actively seek us and them out the next time they assess their saddle options.

Horses need and deserve riders who have the skills, desire and respect to be able to ride in horse-friendly saddles. Those of us who have dedicated our lives to making and supplying this kind of saddle can only ask that more riders step up to the plate and commit to developing the knowledge and skills they need to take advantage of the work we do, or at least keep moving towards us.

