



Saddling the Young Horse

Addressing safety and accommodating potential changes



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When you know as much as we know about the impact that saddles have on the soundness, health and performance of the horse, it is very disheartening to hear someone say "Oh, I will wait till my horse is broken in and doing some regular work before I worry about getting a saddle for him".

We understand their dilemma, because there is always some concern that when a horse is first backed, it might do something dramatic that could damage the saddle. However, when horses are started correctly and progressively, it is very, very rare for them to become unmanageable and do damage to themselves or the equipment you are using.

It takes a young horse very little time to figure out that if the saddle is digging in to the reflex areas of his back, because it is the wrong shape or width, it is more comfortable to keep his back pulled down and his hind quarters disengaged rather than moving as nature intended him to move and its weight too much on its forehand.

It takes a young horse very little time to get into the habit of keeping its shoulder blades pulled forward, which significantly shortens its stride, if the saddle does not allow the free rotation of the shoulder blades.

What is the point of starting a young horse in its ridden life in a saddle that is training him away from his natural athleticism and movement, and then spend the next 20 years trying to recover its natural good movement?!

The BALANCE Saddling System, is a perfect introduction for a young horse to the new sensation of carrying a saddle and then a rider.

However, before the young horse gets his first saddle, it is important to pay attention to how well prepared he is, both physically and mentally, for the demands of carrying the unnatural weight of a rider.

To this end, BALANCE will not sell a saddle to someone who is planning on riding a young horse under the age of 3 years. Even at 3 years or older, we will want to see evidence that the horse is mature enough, healthy, sound and fit before we will supply a saddle. Some horses mature very slowly or have had a bad start because of nutritional deficiencies or trauma, and time allowed at the start of their lives, to make sure that they are strong enough to cope with being ridden, can add 10 years extra of healthy, sound performance (as well as far fewer vets bills!!!).

There is a reason for the abolition of sending children down mines, but for some reason, and in some countries, it has become acceptable to ask very immature horses to work far harder, and with highly unnatural stresses than their bodies can cope with! The so called 'advances' in veterinary

science and drugs have done no favours, because so much is designed to try to fix or hide damage that is created by poor management, poor training methods and the rigours of immature bodies being over-stressed.

So, even before the saddle is thought about, it is important to allow enough time for a young horse to mature; provide good management and do enough constructive in-hand work and handling for the horse to be at a level of fitness that will make it easier for him to carry the unnatural weight of a rider. The horse has to be mentally mature enough and confident enough to cope with the training programme as well.

Assuming that this has all been attended to, you need a good, basic saddle to start the young horse in and for the rider to feel secure enough in. GP style saddles are usually preferable to straight cut saddles for starting horses, because they allow the rider to use a shorter stirrup length and adopt a very balanced and co-ordinated position.

- The saddle needs to be built on a tree that is wide enough, and appropriately shaped, to be sympathetic to what should be a healthy, round back that is relatively straight between the withers and the croup. If the angles and width of the tree are narrower than the horse, it will be doing damage every time it is used.
- The panels need to be filled with a material that has some give, whether this comes from a flocked panel or foam panel.
- The saddle needs to be wide enough to allow the use of a JB pad under the front, without it unbalancing the saddle.
- The saddle needs to be wide enough to allow the use of a decent saddle pad to provide comfort, without it lifting the saddle too high of the horses back.
- The saddle should always be used with a breastplate on a young horse to ensure that even if the saddle gets moved out of position (an enthusiastic buck or a spook, for example!) it cannot get shifted over to the side or slide back, because over-tightening the girth can cause a young horse to worry and feel a bit trapped!
- There should be no need for a lot of padding under a saddle on a young, healthy horse and indeed, too many pads can make the saddle feel unstable to the horse and this is not conducive to giving confidence.

Once the young horse is able to carry a rider in walk and trot in straight lines and large, easy turns on both reins it is usually turned away for an extra few months to finish growing and then re-started by going through the same programme as the initial starting process, albeit in a shorter time frame. Then it makes sense to arrange for him or her to have an opportunity to properly try a variety of saddles that provide a choice in features like the tree shape, the panel shape and the type of flocking or foam in the panels.