

CUTBACK

Saddles

FITTED TO YOUR HORSE

By Adrienne Hendricks

As a Professional Saddler, I have spent quite a bit of time fitting saddles specifically to the Arabian horse. In doing so, I have noticed that Saddleseat horses have not received the same attention for saddle fit as horses in other English disciplines. A good fitting saddle in any equine-related activity is imperative for the health and performance of the horse. But first we have to understand the parts of the saddle and how they impact the horse.

The English saddle is basically comprised of two sections; the top and the panel. The top of the saddle contains the tree, seat, skirts, stirrup bars, leather flaps and billets. This is the part that supports the rider. The panel is the portion of the saddle that is closest to the horse. It is made up of the sweat flap and the padding that protects the horse's back and disperses the rider's weight from the tree.

Padding in an English saddle is most commonly comprised of either wool flocking or latex rubber. Flocking is actual wool that is sheared from sheep, cleaned and then stuffed or flocked into a calfskin tube that runs under the top of the saddle along the horse's back. The latex rubber panels are covered in calfskin and attached to the underside of the saddle. Traditionally, cutback panels are constructed with a felt base, a second

layer of latex rubber and then coverage of the entire saddle in calfskin.

While both wool flocking and latex rubber padding have their own advantages and disadvantages, I believe wool flocking is a superior option. Wool is malleable and can be adjusted to fit your horse's back. As long as the tree is wide enough, the underside of a wool flocked panel can be adjusted in a variety of ways. It has quite a bit more padding than the latex rubber panels so it provides extra comfort for your horse. I know that when I am in my tennis shoes, I can walk and run much better than I can in my penny loafers. This is a principle I apply to saddle fitting. As we ask our horses to engage their hindquarters, they are lifting their backs and pressing up into the tree. A comfortable panel will allow them to engage and move forward more readily. In time, as the wool compresses, more can be added for a perfect fit. Sometimes old flocking needs to be completely removed and new wool added. With this adjustment, the saddle functions like brand new.

The underside of most saddles today is calfskin. Why does that matter? Occasionally you might see a saddle with fabric on the underside. This fabric is actually 1/8 inch thick wool serge. Serge is woven wool fabric and the precursor to



**Louisville Deep Seat
Flocked Panel**



**Louisville Wool
Flocked Panels**

ADDING WOOL

Here wool is being added to the underside of the flap using a flocking iron. The saddle is turned over and flocking ports are accessed between the flap and the panel. For leather covered panels, this is only way fit can be adjusted unless the panels are unlaced and dropped.



calfskin. In my opinion, serge panels are far superior to calfskin for several reasons. The first is that it is much softer and stays more supple than calfskin. It goes onto their back “warm,” which means it is softer from the moment you begin to saddle your horse. It is much easier to regulate the fit of the saddle as you can be more precise in where you adjust the flocking. A round awl tool can reach anywhere on the panel as opposed to being limited to only where your flocking irons can reach with calfskin. This allows for a much better fit for your horse.

Typically, Saddleseat saddles are 19 to 23 inches long on the horse’s back, which corresponds with the seat size. Due to the length, these saddles can often sit high on the withers, or on the loin area of the horse. Most horses’ backs are not flat. When the saddle has contact in the front and the back, but little to no contact under where the rider is sitting, that is called “bridging.” This can

cause problems because the purpose of the saddle is to evenly distribute the rider’s weight along the entire length of the saddle. If the saddle is only making contact in a few spots, these areas bear more weight and can eventually cause soreness and irritation. A good indication of a poorly fitting saddle is when a horse is grumpy upon tacking.

Having wool flocked panels allows you to add wool in areas that are not in contact with the horse’s back and remove wool in areas that need more room. You can adjust the underside of the saddle to distribute all of the rider’s weight. By doing this, the horse will not have painful pressure points and can move forward more comfortably and evenly. An analogy of this is if you are wearing a backpack and one of the straps is uneven or the weight is uneven. You can feel more pressure on one side of the strap. Your movement will become uneven, and your muscles

REGULATING

Flocking is being adjusted on the underside of the panel. Wool would be added as seen in the previous photo and then moved around using a regulating awl. The awl is inserted directly into the panel through the serge, and then the tip is moved inside the panel to move the wool. You can be very precise in fit because anywhere on the panel can be easily accessed.



will develop differently to compensate for the imbalance. You may also develop some soreness as the pack is heavier on one side. The same is true for a rider in a saddle that does not sit evenly on the horse's back.

Wool flocking also allows for adjustment of the saddle's balance point, or the flat place in the saddle where the rider sits. The rider is balanced on their pubic and seat bones. If this spot is unbalanced, you might feel perched forward like you are riding uphill or shifted back like you are behind the horse's motion. With wool flocked saddles, you can alter this position to provide a better balance combination for the rider and the horse.

As horses grow and develop, they can have imbalanced conformation. A horse can end up croup high, have prominent withers or have some type of unique conformation. Riders are all built differently as well. Being in balance may be

somewhat different for each person, but it is also the foundation of good equitation. Therefore, when a horse is fitted with a properly balanced saddle, the horse is better able to move to its fullest potential.

While this all may seem complicated, the basic principle is to find a saddle that comfortably fits you and your horse. If it is a wool flocked saddle, adjustments can be made to benefit both the horse and rider. In time, obtaining this equilibrium will improve overall performance and therefore result in a happy, healthy and pain free horse. 🐾

Adrienne Hendricks, based in Eagle, Idaho, is a professional saddler who repairs and fits saddles all around the country. She has ridden horses her whole life focusing on Dressage and Jumping. This diverse knowledge base brings a unique perspective to saddle fit. Learn more at www.EnglishSaddle.com.