

How to choose the perfect horse saddle...

Purchasing the correct saddle means knowing what to look for in fit and quality

If you are a new rider who has found his love for equestrian sports to be more than just a passing phase, you are probably ready to purchase your own saddle even if you don't have your own horse. Lesson horses at the riding clubs do come fully equipped, but those saddles have to accommodate beginning to more advance riders. Subsequently barn saddles might not be in the best condition and could be too small or too big, depending on your body type. Your own personal saddle, however, will be bought with you and your preferences in mind, but only if you know what to look for.

Saddles are much like shoes they all function much the same way, but the variety is endless, ranging from new to used, simple to ornate, cheap to expensive. Your first step in purchasing a saddle is to focus on what type of saddle best suits your needs. If you are an amateur rider taking lessons that are a mix of equitation and small jumps, you most certainly should stick with an all-purpose saddle. An all-purpose saddle allows students to pop fences in a lesson, but also has a large enough seat for a comfortable hack across the countryside. Even if you are considering competitive jumping for the future, don't think the advanced jumping saddle will be able to double as your everyday saddle. On the contrary, the smaller, more forward design could make you feel less secure when galloping across an open field. Dressage, jumping, and polo saddles are specifically designed for a particular aspect of the equestrian sport, whereas the all-purpose saddle for amateur riders can cross all disciplines.

The next question to consider is should you buy a new or used saddle? If monetary concerns are a factor, an old but better quality saddle will be more useful than a new, poor quality one. Used saddles have the advantage of already being broken-in although not by your own rear end. If considering a used saddle, make sure that the stitching has not unraveled and the billet straps (under the saddle flap) and girth straps are not about to disintegrate. A professional can repair the straps, but the work could cost you as much as a new saddle.

Breaking in a new saddle will depend on the amount of time you spend in it. Even if you only ride twice a week, you'll start to feel your new saddle soften up within a few months. Both new and used saddles require a good soaping or oiling to keep the leather from drying out. Careful attention to its care can keep a saddle in use for a good fifteen years or more.

Armed with this information, you're ready to browse your local tack stores, but your hunt for the right saddle is not over yet. A saddle should always be bought to fit the rider before the horse especially for non-horse owners.

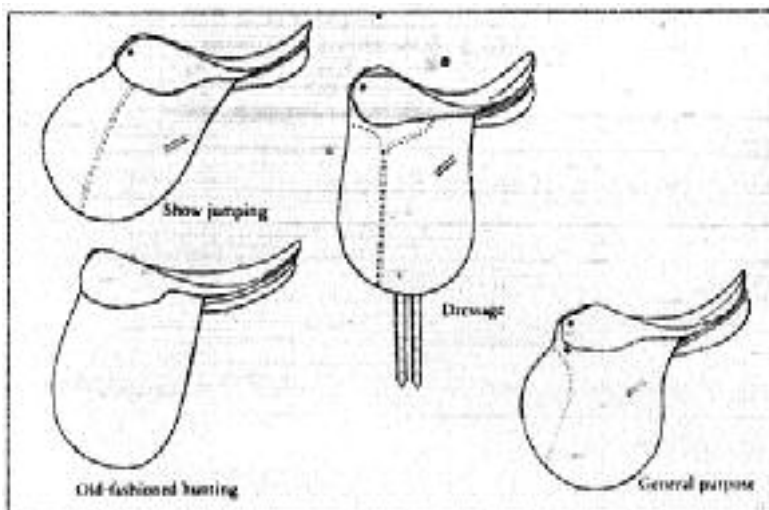
The salesman might ask you a lot about your horse's withers and back shape all of which need to be considered but your shape is priority. Seat sizes reflect the length between the tip of the pommel to the cantle. Most adults range from sizes 16 to 18 or 16 to 18 inches. To determine your seat size, sit in the saddle and place the flat of your hand on the exposed part of the seat behind you. There should be about three fingers width between your backside and the end of the saddle.

A saddle that is too large for you will make it hard to retain a firm seat, but one that is too small will pinch you into unnat-

ural positions. A tack store owner will have the knowledge to fit you properly, but knowing your seat size will aid you if you are buying privately.

Knee rolls are also a consideration. Some saddles are built up near the knees to provide more stability, but other riders find them inhibiting. Try using barn saddles with knee rolls before deciding if they are for you.

Once you have determined if the saddle fits you, you can check if the saddle will fit your horse. As an amateur, non-horse owner, more often than not you are riding a different mount for every lesson. Most saddles will fit your average mount and only very few horses have such a strikingly different confirmation that would require a special saddle. Average saddles will pinch a horse with very high withers for example. Thoroughbreds tend toward high withers and if you find yourself primarily riding these types of horses, consider purchasing



Different Types of Saddles

saddles with a cut-away. If only one or two of your local horses require that special saddle, your best bet would still be a standard all-purpose.

After determining the type of saddle, its age and the proper size, you are ready to make your purchase. Some good brands include forestier and Tolga, but lesser known makers have excellent saddles as well. Unless arranged separately by the seller, saddle purchases do not include the stirrups or stir-

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