MYTHS AND FALICYS ABOUT SADDLE FIT

by Marlene Quiring

“ The basics of good saddle fitting applies to all; horse, mule or donkey.’’

MYTH:  
1. ‘’A saddle will naturally find its own sweet spot on your horse/mule.’’  
REALITY:  
Not so, a saddle will naturally follow the path of least resistance…. even if that means sliding ahead on a horse/mule that has a downhill back and pushing against or riding up on that animal’s shoulders, which besides being uncomfortable for the animal, also seriously impedes his range of motion. That spot is neither ‘’sweet’’ to you or him!

MYTH:  
2.’’ If a horse/mule has good withers, he will hold a saddle well.’’  
REALITY:  
Not necessarily so! While having good withers is an asset, his overall conformation, such as the shape of his barrel, whether he has a long sloping shoulder or a straight shoulder, short back or long back, sway backed, etc. needs to be taken into consideration when fitting a saddle. An animal that has an ‘’uphill’ back or at least a ‘’level’’ back will stabilize a well-fitting saddle better than one that is ‘’low on the front end’’ or has ‘’mutton withers.’’ However, many horses/mules that have ‘’high’’ withers still have DOWNHILL backs! You do not look at the top of the withers and the top of the croup to determine if an animal has a level back. Instead draw a line from the top of the loin and follow that down to the front of his shoulder muscle. In most cases you will see that the back dips down. That is the angle that the saddle will want to follow. High withers will prevent the saddle from coming over his ears…. but many horse/mule’s backs are definitely ‘’downhill.’’ If you are relying on his withers to hold the saddle on you are making a mistake.

MYTH:  
3. ‘’If you have your saddle too far back, you are going to hurt those kidneys!’’  
REALITY:  
You couldn’t hurt the kidneys of a horse/mule even if you hammered on his loins. His kidneys are a suspended organ well protected by bone, muscle and tissue; out of reach of any damage that could be caused by pressure on his loin area. You can however cause sore loin muscles or loss of hair by tree skirts that are too long or a tree that has bars that are too long for that animal’s conformation.

MYTH:  
4. ‘’Saddle and harness marks and scars on a horse or mule is just the sign of a well broke/worked animal.’’  
REALITY:  
Not true! Saddle or harness marks and scars should not be the mark of an animal that has been well used, they do however reflect an animal that has been carrying improperly fitted or positioned tack. There can be other reasons for ‘’marking ‘’ up a critter such as scalding from heat retention and so on, but most animals we see are simply not properly tacked up or have not been in the past.

MYTH  
‘’ The only way to get a good fit on my mule is to order a saddle with mule bars. [Or order a custom made saddle.]’’

REALITY: While either of the above is usually a step in the right direction, it may not solve your saddle fitting problems. For starters, a saddle built on mule bars still has to have the correct width, angle, twist, belly and length of bar for your mule. If that information is not available or evident when purchasing the saddle, you are relying on pure good luck that that saddle will fit your mule. Many folks are not aware of the shape and size of the tree that their animal will require and get caught up or dazzled by all the other information available such as seat size, cantle height, leather tooling, etc. While this information can be important for your comfort, it is more important to find out first if the tree will fit your animal! Just like horses, mules have backs that differ one from the other. Makes pretty good sense then that one ‘’mule saddle’’ does not fit all mules! So, be wary of ordering a saddle just because it is advertised as having ‘’mule bars.’’

Likewise, often a saddle that is custom ordered is sometimes made to fit the rider and not always to fit the animal that will have to pack it. Just because that saddle is comfortable for you, in no way means it fits your horse/mule. Of those saddlers that will fit a tree to your animal before they build the saddle, there are some that may not know how to properly fit a tree or where it should sit for the conformation of the animal. Some may want to set that tree up on the mule’s shoulders, thus if they build the saddle to fit with the tree riding the mules shoulders…what have you gained? If you plan to order a custom saddle do your homework and make sure that besides the saddle fitting your butt, it is built to fit your animal. That means that you must make sure the saddle maker has taken into consideration the shape, angle, and length of your animal’s back and understands the need to keep the bars of the saddle off of the horse’s/mule’s shoulders ! Thankfully, there is some compensation in most trees now used in quality saddles which have more ''flare'' in the front bars, which allows for better shoulder movement. This really helps especially if the saddle is not quite positioned correctly.

Now, that we’ve dissected some of these ‘’myths’’ we can go on to some things you can do to achieve a better fit on your animal with the saddle or saddles you presently own as long as the tree fits your animal reasonably well and is not too narrow. There are ways to help a saddle fit better if the fit is close but not perfect. However, there is absolutely nothing you can do with a saddle that is too narrow but to look for another!

Selective padding and the use of ‘’shims’’ whether bought or handmade can help saddle fit but again, if the tree is too narrow for the animal, extra padding only makes it worse. A tree that is too wide can be made to work by using correctly angled and fitted shims. Riders need to educate themselves first about their animal’s conformation and then learn how to work with that conformation so that that animal can perform to the best of their ability with the least amount of discomfort. A saddle with a too narrow tree, no matter what the ‘’quality’’ of either, cannot be made to fit an animal with a wider back.

I believe that many of us saddle our horses/mules much too far forward and that many horses and mules have downhill backs. I’ve had many folks nod their heads in agreement but then go and saddle their horse or mule right up on the withers. While most animals will ride that way, you never get the performance out of them that you could if you moved that saddle right off of any moving parts of his back, namely his shoulders! If you position the front of the tree of your saddle so that it is behind the end of his shoulder blade or muscle when his leg is extended forward, you are allowing his shoulder to have full range of motion. However, if you ride with your saddle so that the tree rests on his shoulder or wither area, your weight in the saddle forces your animal to tolerate constant pressure on his moving shoulder muscle and seriously constricts his movement. How would you perform if every time you extended your arm you encountered resistance? It’s likely that you would soon learn to limit your motion to try and avoid the pressure. A short- strided animal is often the result!

During my constant search for more information on saddles and saddle fitting problems I came across an article in my collection of Western Horseman magazines dated November, 1989 written by Dave Jones titled ‘’The shoulder Blade Problem. ‘‘In it Dave discovers that many of the horses he was getting for training stopped their behavioral problems when he discovered a way to keep the saddles off of their shoulder blades. To quote from page 102 ‘’The horse’s pronounced shoulder blades pushed the saddle back, and we noticed that he was a lot more at ease when this happened. It was a little hard to keep the saddle sitting that far back, for we had to use a lot of blankets to keep the fork off his withers, but he stopped fearing his rides. The dim idea that the saddle bars shouldn’t rest on a horse’s shoulder blades had lodged back in the murky recesses of my brain.’’ End of quote. So this idea that a saddle should not be sitting up on the withers has been ‘’discovered’’ before.

White spots in the shoulder area can indicate an ill-fitting or too narrow tree but often they are a sign of saddles that have been ridden too far forward with the shoulders being constantly ‘’jammed.’’ Since many horses or mules actually have downhill backs, it becomes necessary to know how to ‘’level’’ a saddle and how to keep it from riding downhill. Many of us do not even realize that we are being thrown ahead by a downhill back. Once you learn to recognize this it is very easy to see [and feel!] Once corrected it makes an amazing difference in your comfort and your animals too. This is accomplished by building up the front end of the saddle with shims or making the modifications to the tree itself. Then, the use of a properly designed and positioned back cinch will aid in stabilizing the saddle and holding it in position. The back cinch should not be ‘’optional’’ but is indeed very necessary in keeping the saddle in the proper position. The trend today even by trail riders is to leave the back cinch loose or even throw it away. In reality, you would be much better off to use your breast collar and back cinch and throw your front cinch away.

Tim Barton is a retired college instructor in equine anatomy, guide, packer and driver with over 50 years’ experience in the wilderness. Tim’s animals earned their keep, packing, riding and driving each and every summer in the Canadian Rockies; many make it well into their 20’s and beyond. Geriatric horses look and act like young colts and the only white hairs they have on their bodies are from old age! Tim has been an advocate of properly fitted and positioned tack for a very long time and a wealth of information on the subject. You can check out his Mountain Retreat at www.outpostatwardenrock.com.

There are other people that are dispelling the myths about saddle and tack fit and are doing their part in helping to educate horse/mule owners. The proof is in the use of horses and mules that perform beyond the normal expectations, simply because, NOW THEY CAN!

Many of these people are professionals in their own right who do understand equine anatomy. One is a human and equine chiropractor who told me years ago that most of the problems we experience in our animal’s backs are caused from riding with our saddles too far forward. Another ‘’believer’’ is a saddle maker who ran a prominent saddle and tack shop in southern Alberta. He told me that he first learned of this through an instructor in the States that was to teach those from his company on proper fitting of a western saddle. The instructor was ridiculed when he suggested where the tree of the saddle needs to sit [off of the shoulders] and most of the pupils walked out of his class, but not this fellow. He decided to test this ‘’new’’ idea out and found that he got so much more out of his horses when he moved his saddle back that he has been an advocate of this ever since.

Ultimately it is your responsibility to make sure your animals have their tack fitted and positioned properly. Thankfully there are many more instructors now that take seriously the subject of better saddle fitting and more and more owners are doing a much better job of making their animals comfortable and enabling them to do their best for us. Our stock can only talk with their actions; it is up to us to ‘’listen’’ to what they are telling us!