

Ask the Experts – *From Dressage Today, January 2011*



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Saddle-Fitting for a Young Horse

Q My new 4-year-old needs a saddle that fits. But he still has so much growing to do. How can I keep him comfortable without having to buy a new custom saddle every three months and investing a small fortune before he is ready for FEI?

Name withheld by request.

DEBORAH WITTY

A Congratulations on your new horse. I appreciate that investing in a new saddle is expensive, but it is also one of the most important investments you will make in your horse's success. Find the right saddle for you and your horse and don't be afraid to "beg, borrow or steal" a loaner from a friend or look into used saddles. What is most important is that the saddle fits. During his formative years, your horse must have confidence that the saddle does not create discomfort. Regardless of the make and model, I strongly recommend getting a wool-flocked saddle because it allows a saddle fitter to make many more adjustments than she can on a foam-filled saddle.

Young horses may need their saddles reflocked every three months as they develop while others can stick to every six to nine months when in full work (the standard for most older horses). Horses grow at different rates, depending on their genetics, the amount of work they do and how quickly they progress through the levels.

One way to know how often you need refitting is to find a saddle fitter you trust and can work with long-term. As time goes on, she gets a feel for how often the saddle needs to be adjusted based on the musculature changes she sees in your horse. She can also help you make educated decisions on the first or replacement saddle that best fits your young horse.

If you don't have someone in your area, you can ship your saddle to a long-distance fitter. On the phone, take time to discuss what information the fitter requires to determine your horse's needs. This may include sending a video and pictures of your horse as well as a wither tracing. Most saddle makers and fitters can walk you through the tracing process over the phone or will have information on their Web sites.

Many young horses' developmental needs can be met by rebalancing with different padding or shimming with wool half pads, a fleece pad or a half-fleece pad. The fit of the saddle must be established with the fleece pad included. This is a matter of preference, and if you have a properly fitted saddle, it will not be necessary to use the wool pad. Think of them as a pair of socks and shoes. As long as you fit your shoes with those socks on, you won't have any problems. However, for a shoe (or saddle) that is too tight, added padding only makes things tighter. On the other hand, if the fit is too wide, you may find that additional padding helps the issue by making the horse's body artificially wider.

A pad must go beyond the edges of the saddle. Remember that wool breaks down, so wash it less frequently. Instead, brush it out, let it dry and ride with it over a saddle pad. The maximum life of a pad is about nine to 12 months.

Shims can be temporary or permanent. A shim is a system of stacked pieces of material (I prefer closed-cell rubberized sheets) that will lift a specific part of the saddle and support a low spot on the horse's body. You can also add the shims to your wool half pad. When you have a horse whose saddle sits with the cantle much lower than the pommel, and you can't get the cantle up, you can always have a shim (as long as it is beveled). Any time you use a pad, it cannot end with a square edge under the panel or it will create a painful pressure point that can result in atrophy.

If your horse has experienced significant physical changes, this may be the moment to think about a different tree width. Keep in mind that there is no such thing as a standard tree size. It is more like fitting pants – buy what fits. The greatest challenge you can face with young horses is that once they get pinched and hurt by their saddle,, it is difficult to regain their trust. A too-tight saddle tree will restrict, but a too-large tree will move around like a loose shoe and create a great deal of friction. Sometimes people make the mistake of replacing the former with the latter since the horse seems to have short-term relief (like finally taking off a shoe that is too small).

Regardless of how you get there, what is most important is how the saddle fits when you are riding. Adjusting the saddle to follow the muscular development and changes in the horse's body is how you keep him comfortable and give yourself the most effective seat.