

The key to buying the right saddle is to buy one that first fits your horse and then one that fits the rider. A saddle that is either too small or too large is like a marathon runner wearing shoes that are too small or large, it impairs proper performance. It is also important to know that, like shoes, size can vary from manufacturers. This is true of inexpensive to the more pricey versions, so with every saddle purchase you should make sure that the saddle fits the horse properly, besides their fit may change from season to season or as they age.

Western saddles are often sized by the seat size and by the bars. The bars are the support system in the saddle that rest on the horse's back. A general size measurement is that semi-QH bars will fit a horse with a narrow to average sized back, QH bars will fit an average to wider horse's back and full QH bars will fit a wide to draft sized horse's back. If your horse has very high withers you should consider a cutting or A fork to allow extra room in this area. This is simply a guide and each horse is different as are the systems used by the manufacturer, so you should always try them on so to speak. Most tack shops will allow you to buy a saddle and take it home for the day, while still allowing you to return the saddle to exchange for another if it doesn't fit properly.

When a saddle fits properly it should sit level on the horse's back, with room for 3-4 fingers between the withers and the pommel. To check for level make sure the skirt is in a straight line from front to back. The skirt shouldn't ride up anywhere. The seat should also look level where you would be sitting. If it is a used saddle, or after it is broken in the space will adjust to 2-3 fingers. There should also be room between the back of the saddle and the horse's hips so that they don't rub. You should also be able to slide your hand between the saddle and the horse's body on both sides and it shouldn't pinch your hand. If it pinches your hand it will pinch the horse. One of the keys here is to ensure that the saddle is properly placed as well. A saddle should sit approximately 2 finger's width behind the horse's shoulders. If a saddle is placed too high on the horse's shoulders it impairs their ability to move and places too much weight directly on the shoulders rather than allowing the weight to be evenly distributed on the horse's back. A proper fitting saddle should not need breast straps or other devices to remain in place or to prevent slipping unless you are riding steep hills or jumping fences.

Once you have found a saddle that appears to fit, you should test it out on a ride. This is especially true for used saddles. You should give it more than a once around a round pen, but instead ride for 15 minutes or more. Once you are done riding check the saddle pad and make sure that any sweat or dirt marks are evenly distributed and aren't concentrated in a single place. This would indicate an improper fitting saddle. If while riding the horse's gait seems off or if the horse lays its ears back or exhibits other traits that aren't normal for the horse, then the saddle may not fit properly. Dismount and check the fit again and check the blanket for wrinkles or things that may be poking the horse.

If you have been riding using an older saddle, you may notice white hairs where the saddle sits. This shows that the saddle is creating a pressure point on the horse. This could indicate that the sheepskin may have become worn or that the saddle doesn't fit properly. If this is occurring in a previously well fitting saddle it could mean that the horse has put on weight or muscle mass from training.

The next fit should be for the rider's seat. The rider should be comfortable and feel natural when sitting in the saddle. The most common problem with seat fit is one that is too small forcing the rider to sit too far back in the seat. This doesn't allow the weight to be evenly distributed and causes muscle pain and affects the horse's performance. To ensure that the seat is fitted properly the rider should mount the horse and sit in a natural position. You should be able to comfortably and easily put your hand on your thigh at the pommel.

This guide should give you a starting point to find the perfect saddle. If you are in doubt please check with your local saddle shop, they are usually very helpful when fitting your horse with the perfect saddle.