

## How to Fit a Saddle to your Horse

When it comes to saddle fit, there are as many theories about what is correct, as there are types of saddles. The important thing to remember is that there are horses and saddles of all shapes and dimensions and you need to make sure that the saddle that you are using works for your horse. Let's focus this discussion on the ideal fit for a quarter horse that is in a performance sport. With the increasing popularity of the "good old stocky quarter horse," as well as the "appendix-type quarter horse" there is more of a demand for saddles that fit these well-muscled critters. National Roper's Supply has teamed up with the country's top tree makers, saddle makers, breeders and competitors to design and build saddles that suit the needs of today's competitive quarter horses. Out of all the research and test rides, the following conclusions evolved that apply to all types of saddles – regardless of the discipline.

Everyone has heard the term Quarter horse bars, semi-quarter horse bars, full quarter horse bars, etc. If you are riding a "Quarter Horse," these should fit – right? Not necessarily. The problem is the actual gullet height, width and bar spread that goes along with these measurement terms vary. It is equivalent to buying a pair of tennis shoes. If you try on a pair of size 8 in Nike, Reebok, New Balance and Adidas, they will all fit differently, yet they are all marked with the same size. The same effect happens with different saddle trees. The dimensions of a tree depend on who made it and what the intended purpose is. All are made correctly, for their intended purpose and type of horse. Most do not fit all horses. See *Figure a* for some average outlines of the three basic categories of "quarter horse bars." Most quarter horses generally fall into the regular quarter horse to full quarter horse bar category. However, as mentioned above, the actual dimensions for each category can vary tremendously.

To simplify the whole picture for you, NRS has done the legwork and test rides so that you can enjoy your horse and maximize performance, without the worry and time involved in comparing and testing saddles. The following are some basic points that became evident throughout all tests with performance quarter horses:

1. The lower, "mutton" withers of many of these horses is generally coupled with heavy muscling at the back edge of the scapula, on each side of the base of the withers.
2. These horse's backs are generally shorter than their relatives with more Thoroughbred blood.
3. The entire saddle must be positioned behind the edge of the scapula to allow for more freedom of movement of the shoulder without impeding the flexion of the large muscles on either side of the withers.
4. Don't over pad if your saddle fits properly.
5. Weight and age changes in your horse can affect saddle fit dramatically.

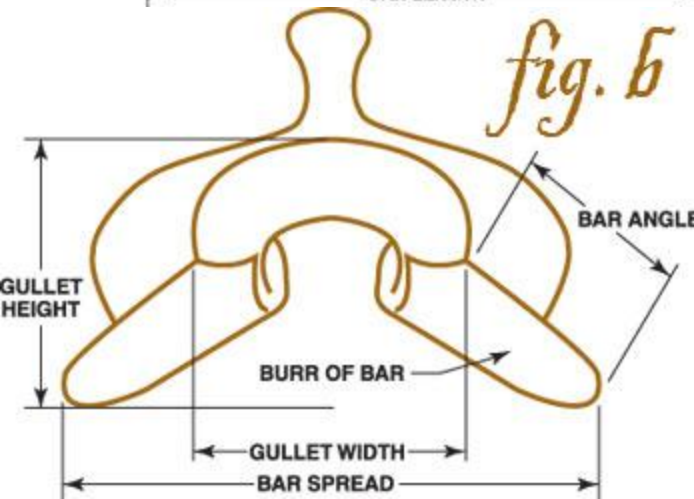
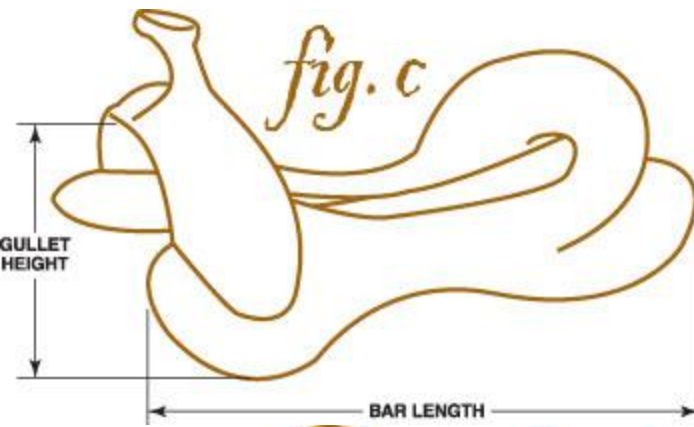
### **Point #1: Lower wider withers with heavily muscled shoulders.**

For most people the first thought is naturally to find a saddle tree that is a bit wider



in the gullet (see *Figure b*). However, more importantly, the bar angle and bar spread need to be adjusted so

*fig. d*



that the bars of the tree will rest flat, against the horse. If the bar angle is too steep, even if the gullet is widened, the bars will still sit too vertically on the horse's back and press into the horse from the edges of the bar. Most of the time the bar angle being flattened and the bar spread increased, will make more improvement in fit than widening the gullet. The gullet height is not as important with these horses, as their withers tend to be low enough not to interfere. As always, when choosing a roping saddle, it is important to maintain the lowest possible center of pull on the horn to reduce torque on the horse's withers. The concavity of the burr of the bar is also important. Since these horses are so heavily muscled, the bar needs to be flatter in the burr area to allow room for the larger muscle mass. If the burr area is too rounded, it will press into the shoulder muscles causing pinching and pain, even if the bar is at the correct angle.

**Point #2: Shorter backs.**

The length depends on the horse, but because the saddle has to sit behind the muscle mass in the shoulder area, it pushes everything back. When the horse rounds his back up to stop or bend, the skirts of a long saddle, and in some cases the tree, can dig into the kidney area as well as interfere with the hip action. Most of the time, making the skirts shorter, or rounded can fix this problem. The length of the bars of the tree is usually fine, unless the seat size of the saddle gets to the 16"+ range. See *Figure c*. The more you can keep a saddle from interfering with the movement of the horse's joints, the more comfortably he can perform.

**Point #3: Saddle position.**

Most often saddles are placed and tightened too far forward on the horse's shoulders. When you first place the pads and saddle, it is a good idea to have them closer to the horse's head than they will end up, and then slide it all back into place, with the direction of the hair. The saddle, if not over-padded and properly fitted, will generally seat itself in the appropriate position. However, with the large muscle mass in the shoulder area on some horses, it is sometimes hard to determine proper saddle position. To check, once the saddle pads and saddle are placed, slide your hand against the horse, under everything, along the shoulder blade. You should feel



the back edge of the scapula (shoulder blade) in front of the front concho on your saddle. If you can't feel it, walk your horse a couple of steps with your hand under there. If your hand gets pinched, even before the cinch has been tightened, your saddle is definitely not fitting properly! Next, you want to make sure that the front edge of the cinch is at least 1"-2" behind the horse's elbow, when he is standing square (see *Figure d*). This allows for the horse to move his foreleg fully without rubbing the cinch. In many cases, simply repositioning the saddle will alleviate fit problems.

**Point #4: Don't over-pad if the saddle fits properly.**

Many people with stockier-type horses have problems with saddles rolling and not staying in place. It is important not to over pad your horse, if the saddle fits properly. Only if the saddle is pinching and you have not found a different, better fitting one, should you protect the horse's back with extra padding. The ideal total pad thickness is 3/4"- 1" (see *Figure e*). Find a good quality, high-density pad that will conform to your horse's back and absorb the shock. The amount of padding is critical to the fit of a saddle. Adding or removing even a single layer, can alter the fit dramatically in either direction.

**Point #5: Horse weight and age changes affect the fit of a saddle.**

Every 50 pounds a horse gains or loses will alter the fit of the saddle. This is true for muscle or fat. As the seasons change, it is important to monitor your horse's muscling, weight and hair coat thickness, and adjust your pads accordingly. Summer pads will probably not be the same thickness or quantity as those used in the winter. In addition, as your horse matures, his back will change shape. A young horse may have a round narrow back that is hard to keep a saddle on. As the horse gets older, his back will gain more definition with more prominent withers, more muscle around the shoulder area and more dip along the spine. In later years, hollows form just behind the shoulder blades. Again, you can use the same properly proportioned saddle during most of these life stages, with proper padding. A dropped rigging or dropped D-rings on a saddle can be helpful in holding a correctly fitting saddle in place.

***In conclusion...***

As with everything, moderation and flexibility are the key. If you can't afford a custom tree for each of your horses, the next best thing is to find a well-made, saddle that will fit 95%+ of your horses and fine tune with padding. With so many fine saddle makers, it is often difficult to choose. NRS has listened to its customers and with the help of experts, now offers an entire saddle line that will fit your horse. For all of you struggling for improved performance with your beloved quarter horses and your saddles, please consider a saddle that is designed with you in mind. The process doesn't have to be complicated and you don't have to wait many months or years to have a custom saddle made for your equine friend. There are many well thought out and well constructed models on the market today that are in stock and ready to ride.