

Breaking Down the Western Saddle

Whether riding for pleasure or competition, there is nothing more important than having a saddle that properly fits both the horse and its rider. We can compare saddles to fitting clothes or most importantly fitting our shoes. If you don't get the right size and shape for your foot, then you will have unnecessary pain while performing your functions of the day. Let's take a look at the saddle and all the various parts that make up its construction to better evaluate fit.

The Tree:

The very heart of the saddle is the tree. Today we see trees made up of different materials depending on the use. By far the best tree to go for is the "bull-hide covered wood" tree. This tree is made out of Ponderosa Pine with one or two layers of wet Bull-hide or rawhide stretched over it. As the hide dries, it shrinks forming a vice-like covering. This makes for a very resilient and strong tree, but at the same time has an innate element of "give" to it. Inferior trees are often covered with canvas or cheesecloth or poorer quality hides. These and the fiberglass or plastic trees are not suitable for heavy ranch work but rather light pleasure use.

Bars:

Bars rest along the sides of the horse's spine. The size, shape and angle of these bars are what determine the kind of fit. There are three basic fitting trees normally. The Quarterhorse, which has the longest, widest bars will usually accommodate most "stock type" quarter horses; Semi-Quarter horse, which has narrower bars for the Thoroughbred type horse; and the Arabian Tree, which has shorter bars, fitted for a shorter backed Arabian type horse. The tree should fit smoothly along the length of the horse's back and evenly distribute the weight of the rider and saddle. Both length and angle of the bars determine how comfortable the saddle will fit.

Swell/Fork:

The swell/Fork is also called the Pommel. Gives shape and definition to the front of the saddle. An "A-Fork" is just as its name says; the front of the saddle looks like an "A" as it rises from the bars to the horn. Other fork styles are somewhat broader in appearance, with more swell to the fork. The support you feel is based on how much swell is built in.

Gullet:

The Gullet is the part of the saddle under the swell of the saddle that is positioned over the withers. You should be able to place four fingers between it and the horse. The design of the swell/fork, as well as the angle of the bars, help to determine the width and height of the saddle gullet. The saddle must clear the withers of the horse or the horse will become sore quickly.

Horn:

The horn can be tall or short, thick or thin, and have a large horn cap or small one. The angle used in attaching a horn to a tree also varies. The horn is always determined by its intended use.

Cantle:

The cantle is the piece that swells up behind the seat of the saddle. "High-backed saddle" refers to the cantle and cantle binder. Higher is snuggler than a lower cantle simply because it offers a higher support on the rider's back. When quick dismounts are needed, a lower cantle gives more flexibility.

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