



by Jochen Schleese, MSD, CSFT, CSE • ©2018 Saddlefit 4 Life® All Rights Reserved

Well it's that time of year again, and you need to consider that your horse's conformation may likely change over the next weeks and months as you go into winter mode. Of course, if you belong to the lucky riders who get to head south for the winter with your horse, some of these points may be of less importance to you. Even luckier are those of you who live in temperate climates all year round! However, we still recommend that you consider having your saddle fit checked 2x a year – once in spring just before competition season begins, and then again in the fall as you either change your training patterns, make your way south to continue competing, or even just want to continue to ride comfortably and make sure your horse is working at its optimal level.



When it's cold, probably the last thing you want to do is go riding. Of course, once you're out in the bright sunshine enjoying the fresh air – is there really anything better than to enjoy the countryside with your best friend? Weather really shouldn't change your routine too much – remember that your horse probably looks forward to his time with you because standing 23 hours a day in his stall is b-o-r-i-n-g. There will however be some differences in his metabolism and his physiology that will impact both his and your comfort.

As your horse's coat becomes thicker, you need to be aware that this can effect saddle fit. The funny thing is that saddle fit is probably your best indicator of changes going on with your horse – getting new shoes, his teeth floated, changes in diet etc. can all affect the fit of the saddle.

Fitting a saddle does not just involve reflocking; the gullet plate may also need to be adjusted. Not only should you be able to change the angle (as is the case with many 'do-it-yourself' interchangeable gullet plates) but also the width. You need to ensure minimum 2-3 fingers space all around the withers – not just at the top – to ensure there is enough room for the shoulders to come up and back through (like a sliding door) when the horse is in motion. If the saddle is too tight (at the withers, in the gullet channel) then an extra pad will not help – this is like wearing another pair of socks when the shoes are already too small.

December 2018 - Saddle Fit and Winter Weather

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It will take you about 4x as long to build up muscle in your horse as it takes to lose this muscle. That is why his conformation can change pretty drastically in a very short period of time, especially if you have decided to give him some time off in the winter. This means that should you decide to ride (even occasionally) during the cold season, it is very possible that your saddle may not really fit optimally any more. This becomes even more true in the spring when you begin riding more regularly – and a poorly fitting saddle can cause your horse to develop either behavioral issues due to pain, or simply work against his ability to muscle up again because it pinches in certain spots. You can deal with some of these problems with your saddle by shimming or adding pads, but it is still prudent to work with a professional to make sure you're not hurting your horse. Best is to you have a saddle fit check up to ensure everything is still working optimally before the cold weather hits (and of course, then again in the spring).

Seguing into something more personal, in this season of being thankful let's take a few minutes to reflect on the horses we've loved and learned so much. Pirat was my partner in many successful event competitions in Europe. His career came to an early end when signs of increasing lameness appeared and his eyes began to lose their shine. He was examined by team doctors and several universities, but it was already too late to do anything. The diagnosis: irreparable cartilage damage at his scapula. At the time I was an apprentice saddler, but I had no clue it was the saddle that had caused him all of his pain and lameness. I will never forgive myself for this. We tried everything – I even blistered his shoulder in an attempt to try and heal him. It worked for about three months – during which time he got time off and just ran around with our other horses at pasture. He stayed sound for about three weeks – and then the hitch came back.

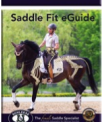
I wrote my book "Suffering in Silence – the Saddle Fit Link to Physical and Psychological Trauma in Horses" and dedicated it to Pirat. It's because of him that I want to help as many horses as possible to avoid the same fate. I hope he forgave me – because I think horses have great capacities to forgive everything we put them through. I now teach these principles through Saddlefit 4 Life[®] (S4L) seminars all over the world – most recently in Australia at the Equitana there. Many saddlery companies have systems which they follow to make their saddles and fit their saddles, but S4L is a philosophy based on scientific research to address the issues that can protect horse and rider from long term back damage caused by poorly fitting saddles – not opinion that results in commercial gain. Only S4L works together with all types of equine professionals to achieve a global language of saddle fit for the complete good of the horse.

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Also, if you are a subscriber to my newsletter, you will receive a free copy of my book, "Saddle Fit and Winter Weather". You can find the book on Amazon or on my website. I also have a Facebook page where you can find more information about my work and my horses. I will be happy to answer any questions you have.



Happy holidays to all my readers and subscribers. I hope you have a wonderful holiday season and a happy new year. I will be back in January with more articles and updates. Thank you for your support and interest in my work.