

Saddle types in relation to your horse's body style

by Dana Johnsen - Nickers Saddlery Ltd.

When considering a saddle for your horse, many things have to be taken into account. One factor that is very important is body style. It can make or break the success of your saddle's and horse's performance. Rider weight and riding discipline are also factors to tie in with horse body style.

The Following information has been compiled through years of study and saddle fittings on a wide variety of horses. I have found that horses generally fall into 1 of 4 body types, I have grouped them from A to D.

1. Fully Treed English saddle - This type of saddle in general is built upon a wood/steel or composite spring tree. The underside has panels (bars) stuffed with foam, felt, wool or other loose flocking, providing a degree of "give."

Pros - Saddle allows some flex and give, smaller footprint allows the horse to bend more easily. Flocking may be refreshed, reorganized. Light weight, permits rider freedom of position and movement.

Cons - Smaller footprint means reduced weight distribution, stirrup position is often too forward, seat is often not secure enough or supportive enough for casual riders.

Common fitting issues - Bridging, excess pressure at saddle "points" (behind the shoulder blades) uneven panel stuffing narrow gullet spacing & warping of the tree. Manufactured in 5 primary styles: Dressage, General purpose, Close contact (jumping), Saddle seat (gaited) & Racing

2. Fully Treed Western saddle - Trees are usually wood covered with rawhide, polymers or fiberglass, also injection molded trees are popular. Wool or synthetic wool fleece usually covers the hard "bars" (panels).

Pros - Large area of weight distribution, secure seat with a rise in front (swells), tree can be re-contoured somewhat, and rigging can be re-aligned. Repairs are generally not costly.

Cons - Usually quite heavy, bars are often too long for short backed horses, limitation to horse in bending, seats can be very hard or lumpy. Common styles include Reining, Cutting, Pleasure, Roping, Barrel Racing, Ranch & Show

Common fitting issues - Shoulder restriction, loin pressure, rigging mis-alignment, bridging & wither pinching.

3. Flex Panel saddle - Whether English or western, the saddle tree is set upon panels which cover a larger area than the tree would. A buffer exists between the tree and panels - often of a shock absorbing, or movement - allowing nature.

Pros - Large area of weight distribution with a degree of "give" combined in one. Often available with adjustable rigging alignment - this type of saddle may sometimes fit more than 1 horse.

Cons - Often quite pricey, center of gravity in rider is raised above what any other saddle provides, possibility of mechanical issues, tree width is still a limitation in fitting. Heavy.

Common fitting issues - Pressure points corresponding with hardware which affixes the panels to the tree. Overly long bars.

4. Semi-Treed saddle - This type of saddle uses rigid or semi rigid components in the swell (pommel) to aid in keeping the saddle off of the horse's withers - as well as a rigid cantle for the security of the rider. The center portion of this type of saddle is generally a pad of some kind - with no rigid restriction.

Pros - Permits the horse full freedom of lateral bend, allows the rider a close contact seat, lightweight, soft seat materials provides the rider with comfort.

Cons - Concentrated areas of pressure if the cantle and/or swells do not match the angles of the horse, little protection for the horse's spine under the seat of the rider. The seat can feel overly wide to the rider. New or nervous riders may feel insecure. Mounting can be difficult.

Common fitting issues - Pressure points from cantle, swell or rider's seat bones.

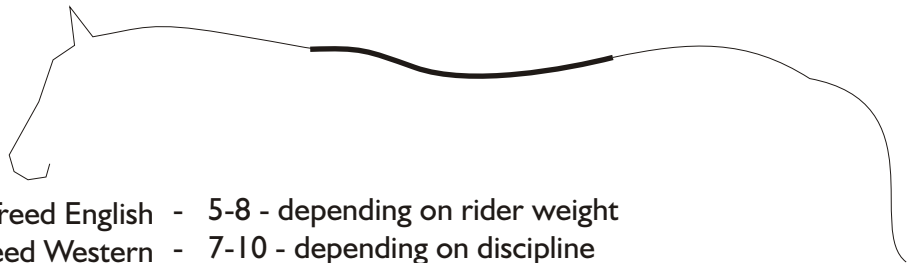
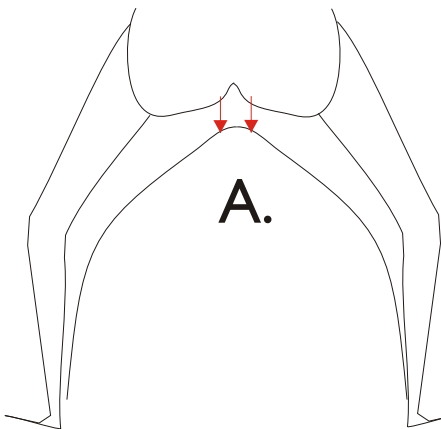
The following illustrations are from the perspective of a cut-away - ending just behind the rider's seat and facing front - areas of common concern are shown by arrows
 The scale used herein is a 1-10 scale - with 10 being best - or most suitable

Body Style # A - Narrow & A-Frame

“A”. backs are most often found on older horses or breeds such as Thoroughbred, Saddlebred, Tennessee Walker & Standardbred.

Defined - Narrow, A-frame, prominent spine, long wither, long back usually with angular features and a lean build.

Requirements - These horses often require a saddle with a longer footprint as their backs are often long and prone to weakness. The rider's weight must be spread far enough from side to side to avoid spinal pressure, rigidity in a saddle is necessary to accomplish this.



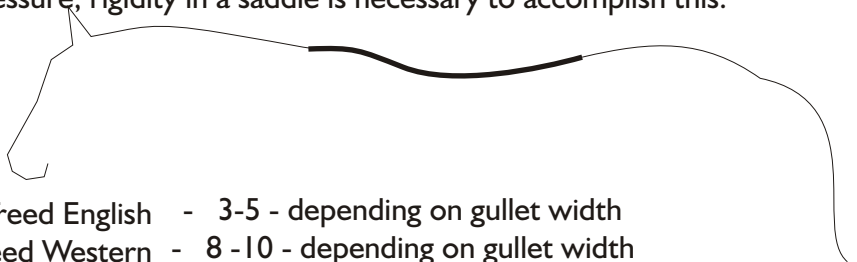
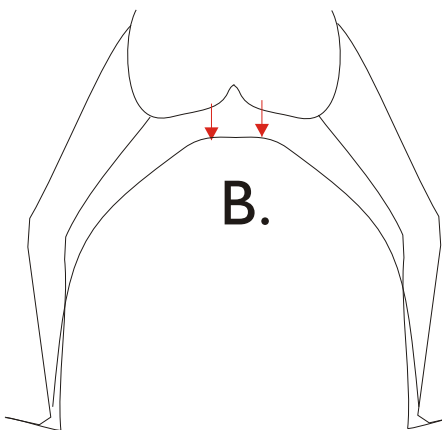
- Fully Treed English - 5-8 - depending on rider weight
- Fully Treed Western - 7-10 - depending on discipline
- Flex Panel Saddle - 6-8
- Semi Tree Saddle - any version - 2-3 - not recommended - padding can assist
- Treeless Saddle - any version - 1 - not recommended

Body Style # B - Average & Wide spine

“B”. backs are most often found on breeds such as Thoroughbred, Warmbloods Morgans, Older Quarter horses & Standardbred. Horses which have a high degree of conditioning often show this.

Defined - Average width body, prominent and wide spine, medium wither, average length to long back. Often these horses have back problems or sensitivity.

Requirements - These horses often require a saddle with a wider footprint as their backs are sensitive due to pronounced ligament, muscle and bone along the spine. The rider's weight must be spread far enough from side to side to avoid spinal pressure, rigidity in a saddle is necessary to accomplish this.



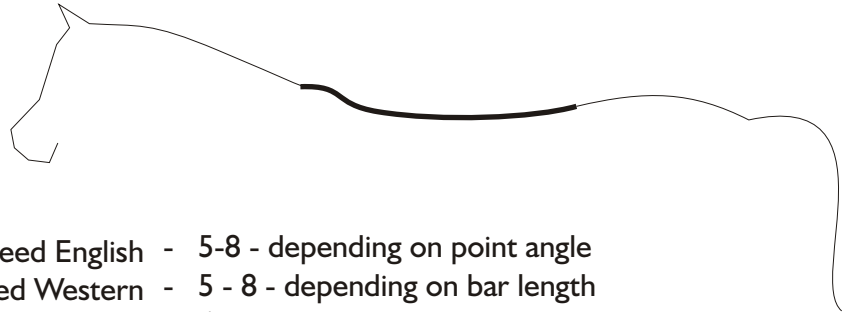
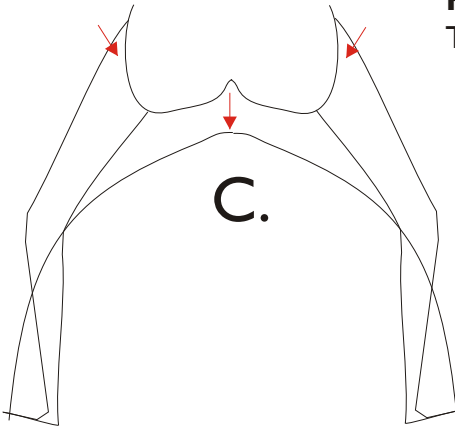
- Fully Treed English - 3-5 - depending on gullet width
- Fully Treed Western - 8-10 - depending on gullet width
- Flex Panel Saddle - 4-7 - depending on gullet width
- Semi Tree Saddle - any version - 1-3 - not recommended
- Treeless Saddle - any version - 1-3 - not recommended

Body Style # C - Average & Round

“C”. backs are most often found on breeds such as Arabians, Morgans, Quarter horses younger horses & Ponies.

Defined - Wider body width, flush spine, medium - low wither, average length to short back. Generally a more roundish body style..

Requirements - These horses are the most easy to fit an off-the-rack saddle to. The biggest issue is usually shoulder freedom.



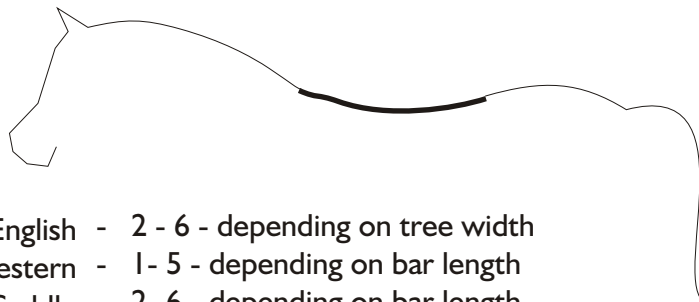
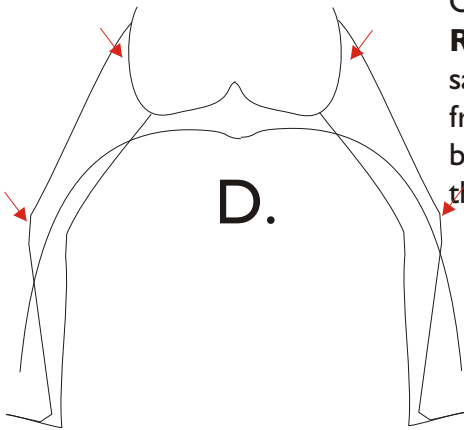
- Fully Treed English - 5-8 - depending on point angle
- Fully Treed Western - 5 - 8 - depending on bar length
- Flex Panel Saddle - 4-7 - depending on bar length
- Semi Tree Saddle - any version - 6 -9 - angles must mate to shoulder and loin
- Treeless Saddle - any version - 6 - 9 - adequate padding must be used

Body Style # D - Double back & mutton wither

“D”. backs are most often found on breeds such as Arabians, Morgans, Drafts, Draft crosses, Icelandics, Fjords, Paints, Friesians & Ponies

Defined - Wider body width, recessed spine, low to non-existent wither, average length to short back. A very round barrel shape. Very strong back. Occasionally these horses are “bum - high” making saddle fit even more fun.

Requirements - These horses are one of the most challenging to fit an off-the-rack saddle to. Shortness of bars, shoulder allowance and gullet width are the most frequent issues. A treeless saddle is most suited to this type of horse. One of the benefits of this body type is that the rider's weight is supported outward - toward the horse's ribcage and on the rider's upper thigh - beneficial to both rider and horse.



- Fully Treed English - 2 - 6 - depending on tree width
- Fully Treed Western - 1- 5 - depending on bar length
- Flex Panel Saddle - 2- 6 - depending on bar length
- Semi Tree Saddle - any version - 6 -9 - angles must mate to shoulder and loin
- Treeless Saddle - any version - 7- 9

Saddle pads should be carefully considered right alongside the saddle. A good saddle pad will offer breathable, washable materials, a contour which will not pull down tight over the withers, breathable padding and non-slip type surface for your saddle to sit on. Generally speaking a more firm padding is required for - Heavier riders, disciplines which involve, jumping, jolting, fast turns, or performance in hot weather. I recommend softer padding material for green riders, children, casual short rides or young horses under saddle before being ridden.