



## Ideal Saddle Positioning

Q&A

Don West

I did have a question about ideal position of the saddle. I rode the super-round palomino last in the arena and noticed he was feeling reluctant and not wanting to lope (we don't usually ride in the arena but I was pressed for time). I got off to see where the saddle was because I had snugged up the breast collar before we began and wanted to make sure it wasn't too tight. The cinch was still angled back slightly and the tightness wasn't an issue so I got back on. When I later removed the saddle and pad, the hair all around the withers and shoulders was spun around and ruffled. Ouch! No wonder he squirmed. I guess that is why I got anxious for the pad to see if it helped. He's a tough fit! Maybe I could use a pretty leather britchen I got with a saddle (that I returned, but kept the britchen) to try on him. That way I could loosen up a little on the cinch and still keep the saddle on? It even matches the spanish saddle in color and has similar tooling!

We'll see!  
Valerie

*Dear Valerie,*  
*When I saddle my horses I put the pad much further forward than you would think was right. Then I swing my saddles up onto the pad (my horses are all used to having saddles swung up, not lifted up, on them). I let the saddle fall about a foot behind the front edge of the pad. Then I lift the saddle and center it on the pad, leaving about two inches of pad in front of the front edge of the saddle. When I am sure the saddles is centered over the pad, I rock the saddle side to side until I can feel that it has moved backwards into the right place. The "right place" is when the front ends of the saddle tree bars are behind, but snugged up to, the shoulder blades of the horse.*

*The cinch should always go around the narrowest part of the horse. That's around his chest, just behind his elbow. With the saddle in this position, and the cinch in this position, the latigos will angle forward from the saddle down to the cinch. The cinch will angle towards the back as it comes up around on both sides of the horse to join the latigos. Note: my saddles have latigos on both sides to make it easier to adjust, and center my cinch. Unless you are riding steep terrain; or unless your*

*house is slab sided, letting the cinch slide back under his chest, you usually won't need a breast collar to keep the saddle in place. In fact, as the saddle gets "broken-in" from riding it will find its own "best place" on the horse's back. Also, if you ride your horse enough to really get him in shape, as he loses the fat over his shoulders, the saddle will fit even better.*

*Horses that aren't ridden much complain about every little minor discomfort. Horses that are really used resign themselves to minor discomforts, and go about their business without complaint. Major saddle fit problems will begin to show themselves by visual signs of sores developing, or by real "Ouchy" spots, found by manual palpation after a good ride. Recently, there has been a lot of information being given out about saddle fit. Of course, saddle fit is important: you want your horse to be comfortable in order to have him happy. A comfortable horse is a happy horse, and a happy horse makes for a happy rider. But, many people today are going overboard about saddle fit, and they're spending too much time worrying, and not enough time riding.*

*Good saddle fit is dependent on good saddle tree fit. If the tree basically mirrors the shape of the horse's back when the horse is standing head forward, in his normal working position (head held at the height he would hold it being ridden), and if the tree doesn't bridge (sit on the ends of the bars with lots of daylight under the center), most horses, under most normal riding conditions, will get used to a new saddle, and learn how to work properly under it. A horse acting up a little under a new saddle is not unusual. Their acting up does not automatically mean that the saddle doesn't fit properly. It may well be that the horse just has to get used to the new feel. That may take a few rides, until the horse realizes that the saddle isn't hurting any more.*

*When the saddle is in the right place you should be sitting in the saddle in the same place you would be sitting if you were riding bareback: that is to say, your seat bones should be in the "sweet spot", and your legs should be hanging comfortably in what I call the "rider's groove"; the narrow place behind the horse's elbow. I designed my Trail-Lite Saddles to do exactly that. Just remember, the U.S. Army rode all those hundreds of horses in the same saddle. How did they get away with that? Simple answer: short bars, with the right angles? Did the Army Saddle fit all those horses perfectly? No, but most of them fit good enough, and, remember, they spent all day in the saddle.*

*So, my advice is, don't be afraid to experiment with saddle position a little to try and find the most comfortable placement for your horse, but don't stress unduly about saddle fit until you've really given the horse a chance to adjust to his new reality. More often than not, if you ignore bad behavior, and reward good behavior, the "bad behavior" almost always goes away, and is soon forgotten. To some degree, it's the same with saddling. Trust that your new saddle fits good enough, ride your horse in it, and see if the horse doesn't get used to it. Watch for visual signs of real physical damage, of course, but they usually don't show up until you've done some serious riding. If the horse is just a little annoyed by a new feel, tell him to "get over it", and soon it will be forgotten. Saddle up, let's ride!*

*Happy trails, Don West.*

*Any redistribution or reproduction of part or all of the contents in any form is prohibited. You may not, except with our express written permission, distribute or commercially disseminate the content. Nor may you transmit it or store it in any other website or other form of electronic retrieval system.*