

## STAYING CENTERED

WITH

## SADDLE FIT-NESS

*The key elements of a good saddle fit.*

*Valerie writes,*

*Hey Don:*

*I saw a video the other day made by one of the other gaited horse clinicians. She was talking about saddle fit, and she was putting the saddle way up on the horse's shoulders, and saying that that was where the saddle should be placed. I know that you were the original gaited horse guru, and years ago I saw you do a saddle fit clinic at Equine Affair. It was obvious to me that you were speaking from experience, and knew what you were talking about. So, please give me your take on saddle fit for gaited horses. I look forward to your reply.*

*Sincerely, Valerie*

*Dear Valerie*

There is no doubt that the equestrian activity I call "pleasure-trail riding" is the fastest growing segment of the equine industry today. In fact, we're experiencing a rapid resurgence of interest in pleasure-trail riding all across the country. Every few days our phone rings with someone looking for a "gentle-broke" trail horse. The typical conversation goes something like this, "I don't want to show, I just want to trail ride." I'm sure that there are as many reasons for this trend as there are flies on my manure pile, but at the heart of the matter I think it's a statement about people's reaction to our fast paced, high pressure, low satisfaction society. Today, many people are materially wealthy, but spiritually impoverished. It isn't about what they're getting from *life*; it's about what they're missing in living. Having talked to *people all* around the country as a saddle fit clinician, it's my belief that many people are feeling the need to get back to something more basic, something our man-made, high-tech heaven has left behind. We humans have a built-in biological need to feel our connectedness to Mother Earth- to get back to nature. For some people, horses provide the bridge between the folly of our fellow man, and the nurturing of the natural world.

When I was just a young buck, back in high school, riding other people's unwieldy, unwanted horses at my local livery stable, I learned a valuable lesson that has stood me well all these many long years: "A comfortable horse is a happy horse, and a happy horse makes for a happy rider." You see,

almost all the horses I was lucky enough to be riding were unhappy horses! They were the “problem horses” that had bucked some other less determined, more intimidated kid off one too many times, (which was usually only once or twice). I got to ride those horses because they needed to be exercised and looked after while they were being resold. Being somewhat of a romantic type, and featuring myself to be a wild and free Indian on horseback, as soon as I was well out of sight of the stables I’d stash the saddles, along with most of the headgear in the woods, and ride “my ponies” bareback. And amazingly enough, many of their behavior problems would disappear! Apparently they enjoyed the feel of me on their back, without the saddle. What a revelation!

It didn’t take me long to figure out that much of what was being labeled as “bad horse” was actually attributable to poor saddle fit and poor horsemanship. My own improvised but improving natural equitation led me to other first-hand discoveries (after I occasionally picked myself up and brushed myself off) about what I now call Horse Handling – Horse Sense™. Those ideas are the foundation of my book and my clinics of the same title. However, on the subject of saddle-fit, I didn’t learn much more until I bought my first horse that I could call my own.

The horses I chose were not the typical quarter-horse type. My first horses were grade horses; a mixed bag that undoubtedly included some Spanish blood, from their Mustang heritage. Later on, when I focused on Appaloosas as my breed, I chose the *more traditional* Spanish Barb-type horses with lots of spots, not the Quarter Thoroughbred type of Appaloosas we see so often today, without much color. Of course, having grown up with the Lone Ranger and *Hop along* Cassidy as my heroes, I wanted to ride these horses “western.” I first bought a stock saddle from a well-known Denver (Colorado) saddle manufacturer. It didn’t fit well. I could never keep it centered on the horses

back. So, I tried another model, and another model, and another, model after model. None of them fit my horses worth a darn. They wouldn’t sit right on my horses, running downhill in front, and, like the first saddle, not wanting to stay centered. For a while I bought and sold so many saddles you’d have thought I was in the used saddle business. It took me many mistakes to figure out that although each saddle looked a little different, they all had the same basic bar shape in the saddle tree.

Next, I tried throwing more money at the problem, ordering custom-made saddles, hoping that approach would solve my problem. I bought saddles from some of the best known custom saddle makers I’d seen advertised in the western horse magazines. Still, except for having better quality materials and workmanship, my results were about the same. At some point during this financially painful process, I visited Monty *Foreman*. Monty was a well-known clinician/horseman of that era. He had his next-door saddle-making neighbor, *Slim* Fallis; build me a “balanced ride” saddle that Monty said was his design. I liked this saddle better than any I had tried before. I liked the flatter, wider seat that spread my weight out better, and let me move without having to rise up out of the saddle. And I liked the forward hung fenders that put my legs in the stirrups where they would have hung naturally, riding bareback. These are features that lend themselves to what I have come to call “sit-down equitation,” a type of riding most suited to pleasure-trail riding; especially if you are riding a naturally gaited horse.

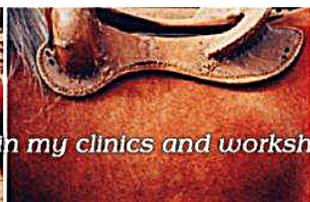
But, once again, I didn’t have the tree fit I was looking for, a fit that would make my horses comfortable, and happy. When I switched breeds from Appaloosas to Peruvian Pasos, twenty plus years ago, my need for the “right saddle” became even more pressing. Pasos horses have a more laid-back shoulder and shorter backs, as do most naturally gaited horses. That meant the saddles had to be built on a saddle tree with shorter bars, the two



Horse's back & shoulder blade - the tree must be behind the shoulder, not up on it.



Here is a tree with lots of rock to fit down on the back and flair at the bar ends for comfort/relief.

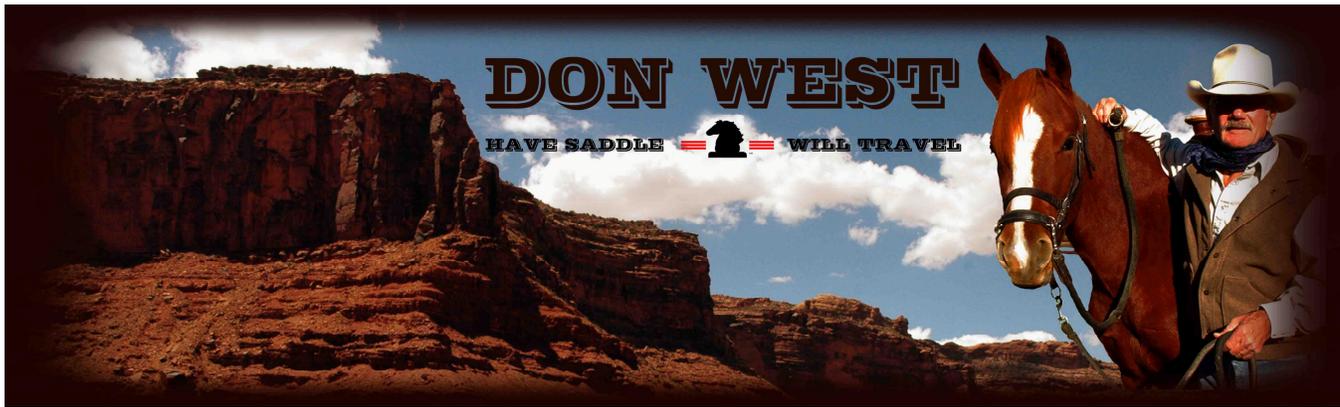


A typical western tree with bars that bridge and ride up on the shoulder blade. See the day light under the bars? See how it digs at the bar ends?



Here is a tree that does not bridge or ride up on the shoulder. The bar flair prevents digging.

One of the biggest questions that comes up in my clinics and workshops is about saddle fit. Here is an article I wrote on the subject.



pieces of wood that run parallel down each side of the horse's spine. I may be a slow learner, but finally the message began to sink in. The shorter the bars, the more likely it is the saddle will fit. That's when I realized that at the heart of every good saddle is a comfortable tree. A comfortable horse is a happy horse, and a happy horse makes for a happy rider.

What is a good, comfortable saddle tree? It is a tree that starts behind the shoulder blade of the horse and doesn't ride up on it, a tree that mirrors the shape of the horse's back when that horse is in its natural working position. It's a tree that when put in the proper place on the horse's back doesn't run up hill or downhill, stays put in the right place, and places the rider in the "sweet spot" where she or he would naturally ride bareback. It's a tree that doesn't bridge on the horse's back, or pinch the horse at the shoulders, or dig into the loins. Unless you have such a tree (a comfortable tree) in your saddle, no amount of beautiful silver or fancy tooling or stitch work will make it a good saddle for you or your horse.

I finally realized that the problems I (and so many others) had been having were coming from saddle trees that didn't fit down on my horse's back, but instead bridged the back. But it took some more investigation before I realized what was going on, and why I was having so many saddle fit problems. I finally solved my own saddle fit problems (after trying everything else) by designing and creating my own tree, with my own bar shape, one that actually fit my horses. Once I had a tree that fit, I had a custom saddle-maker build a saddle on it. And it worked! Necessity was *the Mother* of invention! That experiment eventually turned into a saddle business and resulted in the Don West Training-Trail Saddles and Tack that are now made and sold

by Have Saddle-Will Travel, Inc. But let me tell you why so many horsemen are having so many problems.

It's simple. Today's western saddles are not built for naturally gaited horses, paso horses, or today's typical trail riders. Today's western saddles are built on a formula better suited to arena riding and roping than pleasure/trail riding. In order to get a horn anchored solidly enough to rope off of, you have to use a thick pommel, and locate it well away from the rider. This makes the bars in most western saddles too long for most horses. More often than not they bridge the horse's back, sitting on four points, the ends of the bars, creating pressure points (and sore spots) in the shoulder and loin areas. On top of that, these long bars often have to ride up on the shoulders of the horses to get the rider in the sweet spot. When the ends of the saddle bar are put behind the *horse's shoulders*, the rider ends up tipping forward, the saddle running downhill, and behind the action of the horse. A saddle that bridges or rides up on the shoulders will sooner or later make a sore and unhappy horse, and an unhappy rider.

Typically, today's western saddles have the stirrup leathers hung up over the center of the tree. That's OK for arena roping where you want to "stand tall" in the saddle and be able to lean way forward to rope. But it's not good for pleasure/trail riders. Leathers hung in this position pull your legs back behind you and shift your weight forward, making you fight for a natural sitting position in the saddle. They work against "sit-down equitation." On top of that, three-inch wide stirrup leathers are too hard to turn to the rear. They can make your knees and hips ache in no time.

And here's another thing about typical western saddles. A saddle rigging should keep the saddle

from turning over, while interfering as little as possible with the action or motion of the horse. A good pleasure/trail saddle should have a bulk less single rigging. It should be located under the rider's legs, not at the front end of the saddle. If the rigging is in the right place, the latigos should angle forward and down into the cinch. The cinch should be put in the narrowest place around the horse's chest. But today's western saddles all have double rigging, one far forward, right under the swell, and the other in the back of the skirts. The far forward cinch rigging is placed there to anchor the horn (for roping). And the rear billet and cinch is there to keep the saddle from flipping forward when you rope some big critter, and dally hard and fast. If the flank (rear) cinch is pulled up tight it interferes with the horse's breathing. If it is allowed to hang loose (as you usually see it) it is an open invitation to every sharp stick along the trail to be guided into the horse's soft underbelly. These two cinches working together make a brace out of the saddle tree on the horse's back, exactly what you don't want for pleasure/trail riding.

I learned my lessons about saddle-fit in the school of hard knocks. Believe me; I've made plenty of mistakes. Most riders don't have the patience or perseverance to go through the frustrating (and expensive) things I've gone through to learn these lessons. Most of the saddles that are sold to today's trail-riders were not designed by trail-riders with trail riding in mind. They were designed by saddle makers for rodeo cowboys for arena activities. Today, most horsey folks (who, remember, are trail-riders) are being sold a product where fashion dictates function instead of the other way around.

But, you can only fool people so long. I know this because I am amazed at the numbers of people who have turned up all over the country for my saddle-fitting clinics. These folks are having problems, and, they're looking for answers. I expect to see more saddle makers taking the features I've

designed into my Training-Trail Saddles *and incorporating* them into their own saddles "due to public demand."

Just as I watched skis change dramatically over the past 50 years I've been skiing, so I expect you'll see saddles for trail riders, especially those riding naturally gaited horses, change and improve. In the meantime, if you want to have the best shot at buying a saddle that will fit right and make your horse comfortable, get a saddle that is built on a tree like mine; one with short bars that have plenty of rock so they won't bridge, and plenty of flair at the bar ends so they won't ride on the horse's shoulders or slide back and stick into them. If you're not sure about your saddle maker's knowledge or product, get a hold of the bare tree and try it on your horse... before the saddle is built. It'll save you and your horse a lot of unhappiness. Hope this helps.

### Happy trails, Don West.

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