



The ANATOMY of SADDLE FITTING

By Ann Sanders, Fit-Right Saddlery

I have been a dressage rider for over 30 years, and have had opportunities to ride a variety of breeds, but one of my greatest joys has been to ride and own Iberian horses. I currently own a PRE and a Lusitano at my farm in Ocala, FL. I'm also fortunate to be able to work in the equestrian community as a full-time saddle fitter for close to 20 years as the owner of Fit-Right Saddlery, and most recently as the North American agent for Erreplus Italian Saddlery.

As lovers of the Iberian breeds (like the Andalusian, PRE, Lusitano, Lipizzans and the various crosses), we all know that they are notoriously some of the hardest horses to fit a saddle to. In addition to being difficult to fit, the saddle industry focus has been more on TB and Warmblood type backs as they were thought to be the optimal dressage and jumping partners and this can be seen in saddle development. Unfortunately, this caused the beloved Iberian breeds to slip through the cracks.

Now that Iberian breeds are becoming more popular than ever, we are seeing a lot of new developments within the saddle industry to accommodate fit for horses that are short coupled with large shoulders and wide backs.

Without getting into all the aspects and philosophies of saddle making let me just pick out a few very specific ones that make a difference for our Spanish horses. First, let's look at how the tree points at the front of the saddle are angled, and what that means to your horse. Most saddles have been made with an "A" shape in the front and fit your typical thoroughbred type horses very well. However, they left something to be desired for your wider, bigger shouldered horses that had a lot of movement and lift in the front. Now we are seeing much more open trees in the front, giving riders more options than just hoop trees.

See pictures below.



"A" shaped Tree Points

Wider/more open Tree Points

New style tree on top of old A shaped tree

I can only speak for my company on some of these new developments, but these are the things you should be looking for from any company you decide to work with for your horse. This new shape takes the pressure off of the trapezius muscle area and allows the shoulder to rotate without bumping into the tree points.

Also, the idea is for the majority of the pressure to start a little further back on the tree just in front of the stirrup bar area and go to the back of the saddle instead of the pressure starting right behind the shoulder.

The saddle must be well balanced as well with the rider's weight in the middle of the saddle. If it is too low in the front most of the rider's weight will be pressing down in the wither area. This means the saddle is too wide. This will cause a myriad of issues like short, choppy, uneven movement in the front.

If it is too low in the back, most of the time that means that the tree is too narrow, therefore the rider's weight will fall to the back of the saddle causing pain under the cantle area. This will discourage the horse from lifting its back and stepping up underneath itself.

The worst-case scenario is a saddle that is too wide, this causes the saddle to sit low in the front and the back of the saddle to lift away from the horses back. In this situation ALL of the riders weight is pressing down on the wither area and can cause permanent damage to muscle/bone/cartilage.

It is paramount for any saddle to be level and balanced no matter what breed your horse is and this must be maintained with regular visits from your trusted saddle fitter.

Below in the first picture you see a well-balanced saddle fit. The second picture is of an unbalanced saddle (tree too narrow, high in front). The second picture was posted by a fitter who thought that this was a good fit on a new saddle sale!



Well-fitting saddle

Unbalanced saddle

My company has gone a step further in relieving the pressure on the tree points by developing a new system to take even more pressure off of the wither area. Instead of tree points that are about 2 inches wide, coming down both sides of the front of the saddle, their tree points look more like wings that continue back under the stirrup bars. This spreads the pressure out over a larger surface so as to relieve the shoulder/trapezius muscle area.

See pictures below.



Underside of tree

Tree points

Stirrup bars

The next thing we need to think about in a well-fitting saddle for our Iberian horses is that they can be very wide from their withers back. In some cases, it is necessary to have wider rails to distribute the weight better on horses like this. Unfortunately, this also affects the twist and seat for the rider.

As a saddle fitter I have to balance rider comfort with the horse's comfort. In situations like this, the fitter has to find an acceptable feel for both horse and rider. As you can see, the saddle below appears to fit from the side. However, when we look from the back of the horse you can see that the saddle is perched on top of the horse's back.

See pictures below.



Good fit?

Saddle perched too high

The third point to consider is the length of your horse's saddle area. Iberian horses in general tend to have shorter backs, making the saddle area smaller. One of the big objectives of great saddle fit is to disperse the rider's weight properly. The lower the pounds per square inch the more comfortable the horse will feel. Shortening the panels on a saddle automatically raises the pounds per square inch and in this situation, balance becomes a huge issue.

The drawback to a short-paneled saddle is that if the balance is off, it can create much more pressure on the horse's back and cause soreness just behind the saddle or can cause the horse to drop it's back away from the pressure.

Short panels should only be considered when necessary, however there can be ways to keep a longer panel on a shorter backed horse. One way is to use anatomically shaped panels in the front. This would allow the fitter to keep the saddle as forward as possible on the horse without interfering with the shoulders, rather than to shorten the back of the panel.

Losing support in the back of the saddle due to shortening the back panels can create more pressure and cause soreness behind the saddle. This will also cause the horse to drop it's back away from the pressure. The picture below on the left shows panels suitable for sort backed horses while the pictures on the right shows panels that are too long, which would not be suitable for short backed horses. *See pictures below:*



Suitable panels for a short-backed horse

Panels that are too long

The next thing we need to consider is that most Iberian horses are a bit croup high. If this is the case, the panels must follow the curve of the horses back. There is no way to effectively change the shape of a panel. If it is too straight, it will look like it's poking into your horses back under and behind the cantle.

When working with an existing saddle, a fitter may be able to improve the fit by pounding the flocking down to try and sweep the panel up as much as possible. This, however, is a temporary fix and not ideal as you can never truly change the shape of the panel. Again, this issue causes the horse to drop its back. See pictures below (Note: how the panel sweeps up with the shape of the croup above the red arrow.)



Saddle sweep example

These are only a few of the most glaring issues we find with our lovely Iberian/Spanish horses. I advise anyone who is considering getting a new saddle, used saddle or is having fitting issues with their current saddle to find a QUALIFIED saddle fitter. Not all are created equal and many are more sales people than actual fitters. Ask questions.

Some great questions are:

- *Where and how long was your training?*
- *How long have you been a saddle fitter?*
- *What brands do you work with?*
- *Do you have a lot of experience fitting Iberian horses (or any other breed)?*
- *What about this saddle fits (or does not fit) my horse?*
- *Why did you pick this saddle brand?*

In summary, as an Iberian horse owner don't be afraid to ask lots of questions and don't just buy what the fitter tells you without evaluating the saddle fit for yourself. If it doesn't look right or if your horse doesn't go properly, it probably isn't the right saddle for you and your horse. Trust your gut!



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