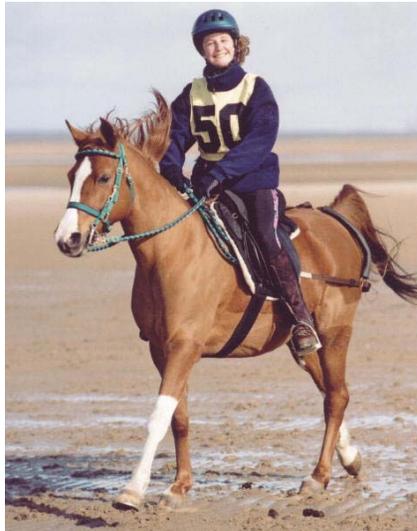


# Saddle Fitting for the Thinking Rider

## Part 2



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## Saddle Fitting for the Thinking Rider—Part 2

Saddle Fitting for the Thinking Rider we are going to expand our understanding of saddle fitting and look in more detail at the dynamics of the saddle, its interaction with the horse and the rider and what action can be taken to optimise freedom and balance. What we will discuss are simple facts related in most part to the way horses and riders are shaped. So the topics covered will include; forward, backward and sideways movement of the saddle, the overall shape of the horse, advantages and disadvantages of various girthing positions, rider shape in relation to seat size and flap shape.

As with part I, it will give you lots to think about but at the same time provide practical solutions to problems you may have.

There are some very interesting consequences in all these considerations for how we select a horse to buy for riding, as there are some extra conformational points we may like to consider to reduce the likelihood of saddle fitting problems. In the same way the decision to breed and selection of a stallion or mare will be influenced by the likelihood of obtaining offspring with a suitable shape for taking a saddle. For we will be able to take into consideration desirable conformational points for saddle fit inherent in the breeding pair.

## Saddle Fitting for the Thinking Rider—Part 2

Why is it that saddles do not stay in the correct place?

There is a common myth that "if the saddle fits it will not move on the horse's back". Firstly we need to be clear on what we mean by fit. As explained in part I, for the horse to move freely the saddle contact with the back must be passive, that is it must not "grip the back in any way". Yes it is possible to stop saddles moving if the front of the panels dig into the withers but this is detrimental for the horse and will eventually, if not immediately, restrict movement and be a contributory cause of hollows behind the shoulders.

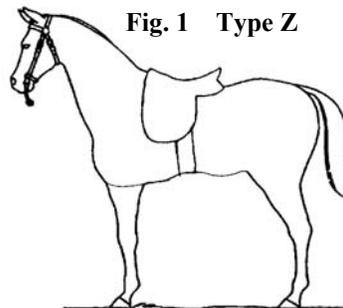
To understand how saddles stay in place it is necessary to look at the whole trunk of the horse between the front and hind legs. Once we know what we are looking for it is possible to tell at a glance just how the saddle is likely to move once on the horse's back and the horse is in motion.

There are two principle lines of movement for the saddle, forward and backwards, and side to side or rotation. Lets start by looking at forward and backward movement.

The horse's trunk does not have a uniform diameter, in general it is narrower next to the front and hind legs and wider in the middle of the rib cage. If we put an elasticated surcingle around the middle of the trunk and ask the horse to move on the lunge the surcingle will gradually make its way to a narrower part of the trunk. So it is with the saddle.

Simply put, the saddle and girth will always come to rest at the narrowest part of the horse's trunk.

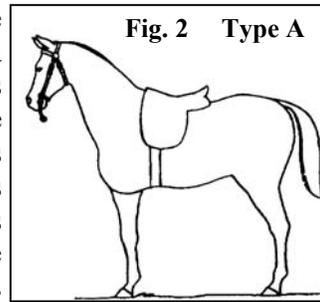
The "ideal" horse shape shown in figure 1 (type Z!) plainly does not exist but it would allow us to put the girth in the centre of the saddle and have the saddle held in the correct place on the trunk as the trunk gets wider both forwards and backwards and the girth strap is at right angles to the saddle.



**Fig. 1 Type Z**

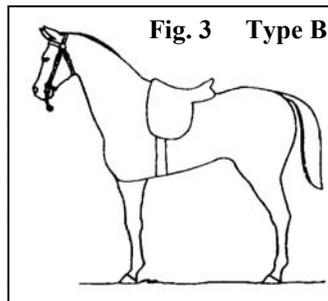
## Saddle Fitting for the Thinking Rider—Part 2

The more normal shape of the horse shown in figure 2 (type A) has a "girth groove" behind the front legs and the girth is fastened to the saddle in the usual place, forward of the it's centre. In this situation the trunk is getting deeper under the front legs and around the belly so the saddle stays in place. The girth also comes



straight down from the saddle to the girth groove, there is therefore no forward or rearward force acting on the saddle which might encourage it to move forward and dig into the shoulders, or move backwards onto the loins.

Figure 3 (type B) shows a horse with the underline of the belly rising steadily from the front legs to the back legs. With the trunk narrowing behind the girth the saddle moves backwards. The simple and readily accepted solution is to fit a breast plate or girth. The normal shaped horse often takes up this trunk shape when jumping and with the added reaction force of the leap makes the use of the breast plate quite commonplace.

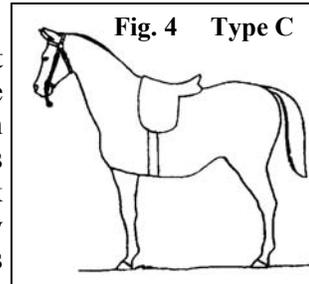


In this picture we can see that the trunk of the jumping horse reduces behind the girth so the breast plate/girth is vital to keep the saddle from slipping back through the jumping transition.



## Saddle Fitting for the Thinking Rider—Part 2

Another frequently seen shape is that of figure 4 (type C). In this case the saddle will move forward. The girth cannot possibly stay where it is, for as soon as the horse moves it will work forward. The photographs below show the horse-trunk type which gives this problem.



There are four solutions:

1. Don't ride the horse - break it to harness
2. Allow the saddle to sink into the withers and be stopped by the shoulders

## Saddle Fitting for the Thinking Rider—Part 2

3. Use a crupper
4. Use a breeching

Lets look at each of these options in turn. If the rider has asked to have a saddle fitted then driving is not usually an option so the first can be put to one side. The second case is the most common solution but most riders do not know this is happening. The usual comment is that the horse has a shortened stride especially going down hill, it is in fact very undesirable and can make some horses quite bad tempered due to the discomfort caused.

This leaves 3 & 4 as possible solutions. The crupper works well provided a suitable crupper loop can be found which does not rub the horse. The breeching can be looked at as a reverse breast plate and provides a greater area over which to take the forward pull of the saddle. In both cases it is most important to have the girth just tight enough to stop the saddle from slipping side ways when mounting. The reason for this is that with the trunk narrowing forward the tight girth will pull the saddle forward (think of trying to keep an elastic band on a cone) until it is loose so increasing the pull on the crupper and the breeching.

This answers the puzzlement of so many riders “no matter how hard I tighten the girth the saddle still moves forward!”. Yes it will and it is necessary to look for solutions which will secure the saddle against the forces moving it forward.

The photo opposite shows Rachel Welsh on her horse Petra Blue, the 2000 EHPS Junior Champion. Not only does Petra have a forward girth groove but he is a very narrow horse with little wither width so exacerbating the problem of the saddle moving forward.



## Saddle Fitting for the Thinking Rider—Part 2

This photo shows Les Spark and Tiffany with breeching and breast plate. Tiffany has the forward girth groove and hates having her girth done up, so she is ridden with a loose girth the breeching and breast plate keep the saddle in place no matter the steepness or direction of the incline.



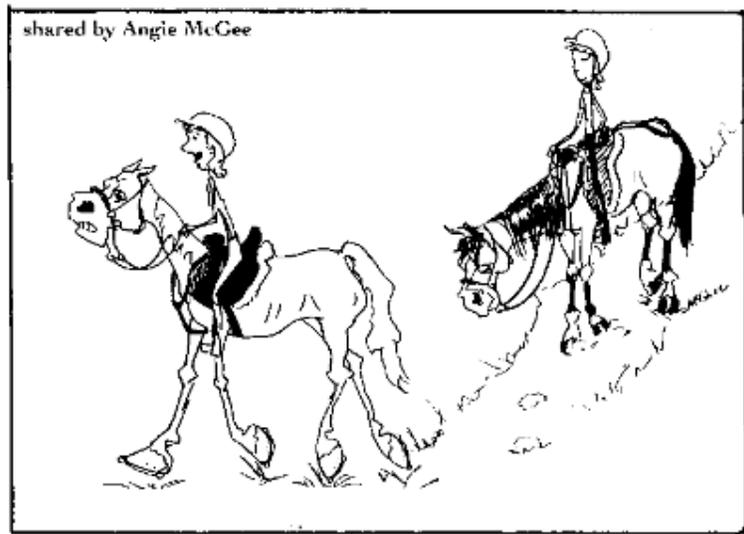
### How to check the position of the girth groove

After a bit of practise it is possible to just stand back from the horse and look at it side on. By following the underline with your eye it is possible to see if the girth groove position is backwards or forwards or just right for the girth as it would come down from the saddle. However there is a way of checking the girth groove position relative to the saddle girth which will make it quite clear to you.

Place the saddle on the horse's back in the position at which is optimally balanced. For a conventional saddle this usually means that the front edge of the saddle should be about 3 to 4 fingers behind the back of the shoulder blade. This allows for clearance when the horse is moving. Now with the horse standing square, if possible, attach the girth to the girth straps on the saddle and let it hang straight down towards the ground. Now look to see how it matches up with the girth groove, that is the narrowest part of the horse's underline. Compare it with the diagrams above and decide if your horse is type A, B or C, if you have type Z let us know!

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Other simple rules of thumb are, for example, type A horses very rarely if ever get girth galls or sores, nor does type B, however type C horses frequently do. The type C horse often has the girth/cinch angled forward, rather than coming straight down from the saddle. Type B horses may start the season with the saddle not moving back, but as they become fitter and the tummy muscles tighten up, backwards movement becomes more of a problem.



*Oh, I'd never use a crupper - it looks too uncomfortable!*