

FITTING YOUR SPECIALIZED SADDLE

Words of encouragement. This is NOT rocket science. Even if you threw your saddle on your horse out of the box and rode into the sunset, the Specialized Saddle fits so much better than most of the saddles out there!

Ride your horse and determine where he naturally carries his head. Is he high headed, on the bit, or somewhere in-between? This is where you'll position his head when you fit your saddle.

Watch the "Fitting the Specialized Saddle" DVD that comes with all new saddles so you'll be familiar with the process. I find it helpful to watch it a couple of times through. If you have purchased a used saddle, e-mail me and I'll send you a copy. Also, sections of it are posted on YouTube. Search Specialized Saddles.

Gather your tools. I recommend: a step stool, a small, bright flashlight, sharp scissors, a hoof rasp, a Phillips head screwdriver, and an old fashioned compass like you used in grade school to draw circles.

Adjust your stirrup length. Pull off the fitting pads. You will see the stirrup leathers screwed into the tree in one of three positions. (I prefer the rear position which is where the leathers will go without the screws. I leave my screws out). With the screws out, put the saddle on a stand or your horse and adjust your length. You want the buckle of the leather about 1-2 inches from the top of the stirrup. When you pull the fender up under the tree, you lower the buckle. Once you have them adjusted, you can screw them back into position. (HINT: screw through the biothane and then into the hole.

This is a good time to cut a triangular shim to fill in the hollow in front of the stirrup leathers. (photo 1). Replace the pads. Line up the front edge with the front of the bars (tree). Line up the inside of the pads with the inner velcro on the tree. (photo 2)

Enlist the help of a horse savvy friend. My favorites are engineering types and visual learners. Have them watch the "Fitting the Specialized Saddle" beforehand.

Stand your horse on a flat, level surface. Have the handler square all 4 feet and position the horse's head and neck straight forward and at the height that he carries it while ridden.

Carefully, position your step stool in the back so you can look down the length of the horses spine. You are looking for asymmetrical shoulders, shoulder slope, and straightness. You'll fit each side of the saddle independently and it is very helpful to jot down a few notes about your horse.

IT'S EASY AS ONE, TWO THREE!

ONE-ADJUSTING THE WIDTH OF THE SHOULDER

Place the saddle on the horse without a saddle pad. Slide it back until the billets line up with the girth groove and the front of the saddle overlaps the shoulder slightly. The saddle should rest nicely in the curve of the horses back. It should be snug and stable with no rocking when you press down on the pommel and then the cantle.

Check wither clearance. If you don't have at least 1" of clearance when you are mounted, you need thicker pads.

Put your hand on the middle of the saddle seat and press down with 5-10 pounds of pressure. With this pressure, start checking for fit at the shoulder area. Look at the front edge. There should be about 1/4 " of space all along the front of the shoulder. Pull the front of the pad away from the saddle and press it to the horse. Is there a gap between the tree and the pad along the bottom of the tree? Using the compass, determine the width of this gap and select a wedge shim that is just slightly thinner than the gap and position it in the gap. NOTE: Never place the wedge shim any higher than the lower portion of the bar.

Repeat this process on the other side.

Now check again. When you insert a wedge shim in the shoulder, it may tighten the front of the pad. You can actually make more room in the shoulder by beveling it out with a hoof rasp. Remove the pad and place on a table. Using the coarse side of the hoof rasp and holding it at a 45 degree angle, file away until the sharp edge is removed. Smooth it out with the finer side of the rasp.

All of this is clearly demonstrated in the "Fitting the Specialized Saddle" DVD.

TWO- ADJUSTING THE ANGLE

While pressing on the saddle, raise up the saddle skirting and check along the bottom of the tree. Use your fingers to push the fitting pad to the horse and look for gaps between the bottom of the tree where the pad is pushed against the horse. Take compass and determine width of gap and insert wedge shims. Remember less is more! You'll see this a lot in the loin area. HINT: The most common wedge shim for the loin area is 3/8 ".

Look at the saddle from the rear. The angle of the pads should match the slope of the loins.

NOTE: The bars are designed to roll up so don't be worried if it flares up slightly in the back. I would rather see it flare a little than be totally level.

Put on your saddle with a pad. Cinch it up. Let's check shoulder area. While pushing down on the front of the saddle, take your hand and push between the saddle pad and the fitting pad up to about the first knuckle. If it feels really tight on your hand, almost to the point of pain, then the front of the saddle is too tight and you need to bevel out the shoulder area.

ADJUSTING THE ARCH

Now let's check the arch for bridging. With your saddle cinched up, take your fingers and run them along the top of the fitting pads, along the area where the stirrups hang. You can also use a spatula. If you have a gap, then there is bridging and you need to fill up the space with a shim. The DVD really does the best job of illustrating this adjustment.

Put on a thin saddle pad and go for a ride and work up a good sweat. Remove your saddle and look for even sweating throughout the bars.

TIPS

Just the front 1/3 of the fitting pads should be moved up or down to gain or subtract width at the shoulders.

Different thickness fitting pads can also be used to gain or subtract width. Fitting pads are available in 1/2, 3/4" and 1" widths.