

THURSDAY, APRIL 14, 2011

FAQ's

1. What do you think are the benefits of the traditional saddle with a tree? Are there any particular types of tree that you feel are better? A saddle tree is supposed to be a mediator between the horse and the rider. There is no such thing as a completely level or even sided horse, (Stand on a mounting block and look down your horse from tail to with and see how even it is) nor are we as riders even or equal in strength on both sides. A tree makes a platform to help evenness and to promote somewhere to ride to, for both horse and rider. Traditional spring trees are beech laminate and reinforced with steel head plates and steel springs on the rails and across the seat. This keeps the tree light but gives it strength and some flexibility. Polo saddles and heavier men's hunting saddles are rigid trees, because there is so much rotation when playing polo. More modern trees are composites of many materials. Most modern trees are light and more laterally flexible and because they are molded are completely consistent every time in both shape, evenness and weight. Some come with removable adjustable head plates, allowing "hopefully" a saddle fitter to choose the correct plate and adjust flocking to fit individual horses.

2. Can you briefly describe your training as a saddle fitter? How do you go about fitting a saddle to a horse? Is there research that has been done on saddle fitting, or is it more of an art than a science? *The fitting Qualification: This is an academic qualification given through the City and Guilds board of Education in the UK. A QSF must have trained with a fitter and completed an Introductory course, then must have 3 years of experience with a mentor before taking the Qualified course in the UK. An Introductory course for the SMS is held once a year in North America in Chambersburg, PA at Wilson College. The Qualified course and exams are held in August each year in the UK. For details, email info@hastilowusa.com. The training consists of education in saddle manufacturing, panel design, leathers, girthing design, physiology of the horse, biomechanics of the horse, safety, record keeping, rider mechanics, assessment of the horse in both static and dynamic situations, and assessment of the rider in saddle(s), practical fitting of dressage, all purpose, close contact, endurance and jumping saddles. A general knowledge of how the teeth, bridling, biting and farriery effect saddle fit is also required.*

3. How can a horse-owner choose the right traditional saddle for his or her horse? What should people be looking for? *Choosing a saddle for the horse owner is a daunting experience these days because there is so much conflicting information out there, and a saddles, as with a pair of jeans is partly a preference for different comfort on the part of the rider. In a group of woman that may all be a size 10 jeans, you will find that each one will choose a different design to be comfortable in because we are all slightly different. This applies to horses also. Not all medium saddles will fit all medium horses, this is why the SMS expects its saddle fitters to fit at least 3 different brands. Deciding on a saddle that suits you and fits your horse is best done with a QSF because they can establish the need for correct arch (width) correct rail angle (back shape) correct panel (muscling) proper flaps and knee position for rider, correct seat size for rider, proper girthing positions for the stability of the saddle and correct size of back gusseting for stability and the need for front gusseting for point support. With our horses these days being mixed breeds which offers great temperaments but difficulties with saddle and bridle fit the need for help in this area is becoming more and more important.*

4. What role do saddle blankets and saddle pads play in making the saddle more comfortable or appropriate for a horse? *Pads can have as great a role as the saddle in causing discomfort. Quite often as a QSF I will go out to a horse who is sore only to find that the tree and saddle are not appropriate, but that the flocking is low and has caused the back of the pad to rub the back and spine of the horse (this occurs because as the front of the saddle drops down from level the back of the saddle rises and then pivots when in motion causing the pad to rub). Pads also, if they are cut on the straighter side, from front to back, work down over the wither and cause pressure in both the wither area and on the trapezius muscle, it is worse for high withered horses and for very round withered and rubbed horses. In general our physics lessons tell us that each extra layer causes more friction, so the fewer pads the better, and if you have to use correctional ones include them in your saddle fitters consultation so you are assured they are fitted correctly.*

5. Do you have any experience with treeless saddles? What are your thoughts on this design? Are there circumstances where you would recommend or use these saddles? *The Society of Master Saddlers has done very consistent research with the use of a "Pliance" computerized pressure system worked through Bluetooth and synchronized with a video camera that can do slow motion and still shots. This has allowed the Society and companies that hire them to assess the saddles, girths, and pads that they manufacture doing experiments to show*

pressure maps of well fitting saddles, of saddles with pads, of research into mounting and the torque and pressures involved. Watching horses jump, canter and trot (see Kent & Masters website for video) research has been done by the SMS into treeless saddles using the Pliance system (I believe this is on the SMS site) the results that were found showed that-firstly all treeless saddles have some form of front arch and stirrup bar so they are not truly treeless. This of itself offers pressure points as the area of the arch is over a small % of the back-the larger the footprint the greater the spread of pressure. The rider is also not mediated from the horse so pressure occurs directly below the seat bones on a small area of the back and probably not equally, so over time pressure points occur.