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## Pros & Cons of Wool Flocking vs. Other Options

The pros & cons of wool flocking vs. foam, vs. felt & foam, vs. saumur, or airpanels.

The actual panel on the base of a saddle may be filled to give it cushioning and resistance with many different materials or methods. The main ones are:

- Flocked panels
- Foam panels
- Felt & Foam panels
- Felt & Flock panels (saumur)
- Air Panels

There are pluses and minuses for all these methods, so choosing the correct panel is important.

Flocked panels are filled with a selection of different wool types or artificial flocking which can vary from carpet clipping to soft toy stuffing to artificial wool staple. With artificial flocked saddles the best is the artificial wool staple because it is resilient, gives an even flock and is easily adjusted. The disadvantages to this are it does not dissipate heat so it has a hot feel and it will become lumpy quicker than wool. It is usually found in the lower price bracket saddles as it is less expensive.

Real wool flocked saddles dissipate heat and remain soft longer, they come in three main types: white wool-which is very soft and gives a soft panel, but compresses easily; long staple mixed fiber-which is grey and holds a better shape, and Jacobs-which is the most expensive but holds its resilience and shape the best, giving a spring but firm base for the saddle.

Flocked saddles can be adjusted if a horse changes shape, the actual shape of the panel against the horse will mold and contour to your horse. However, these saddles tend to weigh more and have a larger footprint on the horses back because they are bigger. That is not necessarily a minus, as it spreads the weight of the rider.

Foam panels are usually referred to as close contact panels. Contrary to common ideas a close contact saddle is not a jumping or saddle type, but a panel type and any type of saddle can be "close contact." Foam close contacts are that because there is less material between rider and horse. The panel is much thinner and smaller and was designed really only to be used as a light weight saddle for the competition ring.

The pros of this design is that it is a light saddle with a lot less leather in it, the cons are that foam panels last a minimum of 3 to 4 years and as the panel has less leather in it, the whole base needs to be replaced in that time frame.

Foam breaks down to powder under the onslaught of sweat when it soaks through the leather pores. Once this starts to happen, you are riding the tree directly onto the horses back. Foam panels cannot be altered or adjusted.

Felt & Foam panels are also often close contact. This form of panel has a felt top and a foam against the horse. A much more expensive panel, as good felt is extremely expensive. It keeps its shape, but the foam still deteriorates and needs replacing; this is expensive as the saddle has to be taken apart to do this. You still cannot adjust these panels.

Felt & Flock panels are probably the most expensive panel of all, as it has a close contact feel with flock added on top of the felt. Advantages-the felt keeps the panel shape. Flock can be added to adjust the panel, great care needs to be taken here, as over flocking is very easy. Main disadvantage is the cost.

Airpanels-There are two basic systems on the market; the Wintec sealed air panels (CAIR) and First Thought Equines adjustable air panels (FLAIR). Both systems use 4 airbags or bladders, 1 at the front of

each panel, 1 at the back of each. these bladders overlap in FLAIR but not in the CAIR. FLAIR has a valve with each panel so they can be adjusted independently. Pros-great idea in FLAIR system for asymmetric horses, or horses with difficult shaped backs. (CAIR is a sealed system so this does not apply). Cons- Bladders puncture and its hard to tell. Air is a temperamental medium, it is very temperature sensitive as anyone knows if you have a newer car with tire sensors (THEY DRIVE ME CRAZY!), if we have 2 or 3 cold days the car complains, then if the days get warmer its alright until it gets too hot!!!!

Unfortunately the complaints your car makes are echoed by your horse, pressures change with air temps and altitudes. Air panels need a lot of maintenance to keep the horse happy-really each season. Air panels don't dissipate heat well after a certain temperature, and they can feel like a "bouncy castle" on hot days in the summer-as heated air expands. Unfortunately this is often the time your horse expands as well.

Hopefully this is helpful and clears up confusion that I know is out there about panels and which is best for your horse or for you.