

Riding Saddles for Horses: Western and English

Our topics for this week are the:

- **History of saddles**
- **Parts of a saddle**
- **Types of Western saddles**
- **Types**

The most important consideration in successful riding of horses is to pick the right horse, but after that, it is to use the appropriate saddle for the goal you wish to achieve. Today, we will describe 9 types of western riding saddles and 4 types of English riding saddles.

PARTS OF A SADDLE

The skeleton or foundation of a saddle is the tree, usually a wooden structure. The tree is covered with leather. The seat of a saddle is bounded in the back by the cantle and in the front by the pommel or fork. A horn is present on the pommel of only western saddles. Leather that covers the tree below the seat are called the skirts on Western saddles and panel on English saddles. The leather directly beneath the seat that protects the rider's legs from the horse's sides are the fenders on Western saddles. The equivalent on English saddles are the flaps. Stirrup leathers that connect the seat to the stirrups are underneath the fenders on Western saddles and on the outside of flaps on English saddles. The rigging is how the saddle is attached to the horse. Straps that extend down from the saddle are billets. Belts that attach to the billets and go under the horse's chest are called cinches on Western saddles and a girth on English saddles.

HISTORY OF SADDLES

Western saddles have evolved from the Moorish saddles used in the Moor invasion of Spain in the 700s. These had high pommels, high cantles, and long stirrups. There are two general styles of western saddles. In the southwest Texas-style is most common. In the far west and northwest, California is the most popular style. The different saddle styles are based on different roping styles between Texas and the Northwestern U.S.

WESTERN SADDLE

Ranch/All Around - a compromise of many possible functions.

The fork - front of the saddle (aka pommel or swells) is either swell fork (Texan) or A-fork (Californio). The horn is 3 inches high and 3 inches across the cap. The cantle is 4 inches high, and the rigging (attachments for the cinch) are usually flat-plate metal.

Trail/ Pleasure - the goal for trail saddles are to be comfortable for the rider and horse

The fork can be any type. The horn is 3 inches high. The cantle is 4 inches high with a steep angle for seat security going up inclines. The rigging often in-skirt and $\frac{3}{4}$ position. The position accommodates using just one cinch and in-skirt attachments are slots in the saddle's bottom edge for billet attachment. This reduces a lump under the rider's leg that can be caused by other riggings.

Roping

Due to different types of roping, there are different types of roping saddles. In general, they are similar to ranch saddles. Californio-style saddles have A-forks and large diameter, mushroom shaped horns for dallying after roping cattle. Texas-style roping saddles have swells and medium sized horns similar to ranch saddles for tying caught cattle to the saddle horn. Cantles are lower for competition calf roping saddles to aid in dismounts. Fenders go straight down to keep riders more balanced for rope work at speed or when stopped. All roping saddles are double rigged, that is, have a front and back cinch to stabilize the saddle when being pulled on by cattle that have been roped.

Barrel Racing

Barrel racing is a speed event. Saddles are made with lighter weight materials, including synthetic trees, which is the foundation of saddles. Traditional saddles use wooden trees. Saddle skirts tend to be rounded to also reduce the saddle weight. The fork has swells of variable size, depending on rider preference. Seats are usually suede to reduce slippage. The cantle is tall, 4-5 inches for the rider to maintain his or her seat during fast turns and rapid acceleration. The horn is 4 inches tall to allow for a quicker, easier grasp. The rigging is usually in-skirt with one cinch.

Reining

Reining saddles have deep seats that rise toward the fork which has small swells. This facilitates maintaining the rider's seat during rapid accelerations and sliding stops. The horn is short at $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 inches to reduce possible obstruction to the reining hand's movements. Plus, reiners are not allowed to touch the horn. Fenders have a narrow attachment allowing free swinging forward and back. Rigging is double or $\frac{7}{8}$ s. Some riders ride with a single cinch and hanging back billets and others ride doubled rigged with a front and back cinch..

Cow Horse

Part of cow horse competition is reining, so the saddle requirements are very similar. However, the other portion of cow horse competition is controlling the movements of a cow. Cow horse riders are allowed to grasp the horn when needed and it has to be strong enough to hold a roped cow. Cow horse saddles have a higher and stouter horn, a higher pommel and larger swells, and a flatter seat than a reining saddle. The horn has a smaller cap than a roping saddle.

Cutting

Cutting horse riders desire more roomy seats to change positions in the saddle rapidly. Stirrups are slim or rounded to secure the rider's feet. The horn is distinctive because it is so tall, usually 4 inches, so it is more easily grasped when the front of the horse jumps side to side. The rigging is double with in-skirt attachments.

Endurance

Endurance saddles have a high fork and cantle to create a deep seat that is usually padded. They have short skirts to reduce weight. Several strings and D-rings are incorporated for tying on trail riding gear. Stirrups are wide for foot comfort.

Show

Show saddles are intended to distract the viewer from the work being done. Styles vary widely but in all there is more emphasis on leather tooling and shiny metal to create an expensive appearance than on function.

ENGLISH SADDLES

English saddles also evolved from Moorish-style saddles with high pommels or forks, high cantles, and wooden trees in the 1700s. Further changes were made in England in the 1800s to better accommodate the needs to hunt foxes by horseback. Because of the need to perform frequent jumps the pommel and cantle were minimized making a relatively flat seat. Leather under the rider's legs are called "flaps" rather than fenders as on Western saddles. The flaps are shaped differently on English saddles depending on the saddle's intended use. Stirrups were shortened to aid in leaning forward during a jump. Today's English saddles often have synthetic material rather than leather and fiberglass trees rather than wooden trees.

All Purpose

All purpose saddles have flaps that extend straight down for flat work but also extend forward for jumping. The cinch on English saddles is called the girth. The billets which are straps from the saddle that connect to the girth that goes under the horse's chest. Billets on an All Purpose saddles are short causing the connection between the billet and girth to be a lump under the rider's legs.

Close Contact (Jumping, Hunt seat, Forward seat)

Close Contact saddles are designed for jumping while leaning forward. They are used for show jumping as well as hunt seat and eventing, i.e. cross country competitions. The flaps markedly lean forward to aid the rider's knees to grip when riding and jumping with short stirrups. Knee rolls are increased padding at the front of flaps to assist proper positioning of the rider's knees. Both pommel and cantle are very low creating a particularly flat seat.

Dressage

There is no jumping in dressage. All maneuvers are done on a flat surface. Cantles are high to accentuate cues from the rider's seat. Flaps are long and straight down. Billets are long to get the bullet-girth connection below the rider's legs to improve leg communication with the horse's side.

Endurance

English endurance/trail saddles have longer panels which is padding under the tree for the horse's comfort. There is also a wider, padded seat for the rider and longer flaps for rider's leg protection. Strings and D-rings are added to permit attachment of trail riding gear.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular subjects contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Saddles need to be selected with a riding purpose in mind.**
- 2. A well constructed saddle is an art of experienced craftsmen with personal knowledge of how horses are ridden for various tasks. Good saddles are expensive, but with proper care can last a lifetime and your life may depend on it.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: **www.betteranimalhandling.com**

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.