Assessing Horse Conformation for a Trouble Free Saddle Fit

Introduction

Have we lost the art of assessing whether a horse is suitable as a riding horse?

A hundred years ago, when the army were buying large numbers of horses, they required a conformation that would take a saddle with as little fitting trouble as possible. This forced breeders, who wanted to sell to the army, to breed for the army conformation requirements, and this benefited the general riding public as well.

Nowadays there is no single source of financial pressure reinforcing the conformational requirements for a good saddle horse. These often seem to get overlooked both in pre-purchase vet examinations and when selecting breeding pairs. It seems a growing proportion of horses present their riders with endless saddle fitting problems, with the associated behavioural and movement issues.

And yet it is not terribly hard to assess whether a particular horse is going to be easy or difficult to fit with a saddle. In fact, all you need is to take a close - and informed - look at the horse from two specific views, full frontal and side-ways on. Taking photos, like those in this article, is really handy as different horses can be easily compared and discussed with friends and advisers.

Learning how to make this assessment will pay dividends, whether in buying a horse or in diagnosing and dealing with movement, performance and behavioural problems arising from saddle fit.

The three following panels can be used to ‘get your eye in’ and recognize good and not so good saddle fit conformations, and help you make better choices now and in the future.

A Good Conformation for Saddle Fit

The most important aspect of a good saddle fit conformation is that the rib cage circumference should increase from the middle of the rib cage towards and into the shoulders. The croup should be lower than the wither, with the back being slightly dipped or flat. The ‘girth groove’, the region where the ribs attach to the sternum, should fall on a vertical line about 3” back from the back of the scapula. The best wither angle would be 90° +/- 3° - not flat or very narrow.
**Fair conformation and will improve**

Rib cage not widening from shoulders towards the quarters.

Rib cage is wide between the shoulders as indicated by the width between the front legs.

As with the first horse the rib cage circumference does not narrow into the shoulders and withers.

Tip: with the horse looking to the left the rib cage will bend with the neck showing on the horse's right. It is possible to be misled in this stance if the horse is laterally asymmetrical (more on this in another article).

**Poor conformation - help needed**

Rib cage widens markedly from shoulders towards the quarters on both sides.

Rib cage is narrow between the shoulders as indicated by the width between the front legs (compare with the previous horses).

The girth circumference clearly reduces into the shoulders and withers.

This is a good photo and clearly cross tying is very helpful. The person taking the photo is in almost exactly the right position. The only negative is that the left hind is forward of the right hind.

**Saddle fitting analysis**

This horse is a 14.2 Arab, 6 years old and bought for endurance riding. Impression pad tests have shown that the current saddle is pressing into the withers and causing discomfort. The horse may drop the rib cage down between the shoulder blades to lessen discomfort so causing the slope from croup to wither base. As the saddle slides down this slope the rider is using a crupper. Once the discomfort is removed by spreading the wither pressure over a greater area on the wither the horse is likely to lift the rib cage and wither so flattening the back between wither and croup. This will improve the longitudinal and transverse stability of the saddle. Also the girth groove may become more defined with increased fitness and a crupper may no longer be necessary.

For more information on saddle fitting click here.