



Kitting Out Boris

In May 2007 my pure bred Arab Boris, as a five year old, came to join April, an 'ex' race horse (April doesn't believe the 'ex' bit though).

When looking at Boris I had realized that none of my existing saddles would fit him, so while he settled in I started a search for a second hand endurance saddle. (I couldn't afford a new horse and a new saddle). As young horses change shape rapidly I wanted a saddle that could be refitted on request.

In the mean time I had to order new rugs as he is only 14.1 and very short backed. All of my spare rugs nearly touched the ground at both ends when I tried them on. The 'new' rug very soon looked old and well used – discovered that my nice grey pony likes nothing better than to dig a hole, wait for it to fill with water and then roll in it.

I had to wait about 3 months and was then lucky enough to pick up an almost new saddle, which was then fitted. As his head at least is a fairly normal size I could find a bridle to fit him. This is when the problems really started.

When the saddle was fitted I realized just how wide his rib cage is and how much he narrows down towards the front end. He had almost no withers, and of course no muscle – just baby fat in all the wrong places – a bit like his owner really. In addition his girth groove is just under his elbows, about 4 to 6 inches too far forward.



To keep the saddle from disappearing half way up his neck we had to fit him with a crupper. The other problem with this shape is that tightening the girth also tends to pull the saddle forward, so either the crupper is always pulling on his tail or the girth must not be too tight – a very tricky compromise.

We were, apart from some shiny new shoes, ready to go. I decided against the shoes for a while as I had been told he had been 'backed and ridden away', and then turned out. Boris had not objected to being sat on bareback when I had looked at him, but couldn't be ridden because there was no saddle to fit him.

It was not until I sat on him that I discovered that I had no steering and no brakes. As he by then understood my voice commands and spent a lot of time looking over his shoulder at me to make sure I didn't entirely lose my balance and fall off this wasn't too much of a problem. Pulling on the bit in his mouth to turn him was a major cause of annoyance and he would just stand, shake his head and refuse to move.

I tried an English hackamore. Apart from the fluffy bit around his nose which made him itch I had now solved the steering and brakes problem – not that I needed brakes as the accelerator wasn't working. Every time I asked him to trot Boris thought I was going to fall off, and shuffled very gently round the school until he completely lost his nerve and went back to walk as a safer option. It took some time before he came to terms with the fact that riders tend to bounce around at the trot (especially on a green unbalanced horse), and that he should just keep going. Also by this time he was also starting to get a bit of 'rider carrying' muscle.

As soon as we started going out with an escort and he had his first spook I realized that I had a major problem with the saddle slipping sideways. The day I reached over to shut a gate and ended up sitting in a puddle with him standing with the saddle under his belly I had the saddle refitted and subsequently ended up with an airflow numnah. This improved things considerably, but I still couldn't mount from the ground.

Towards the end of the year I managed 3 social rides with an escort. The crupper was obviously hurting his tail and made him very anti social to horses approaching from behind. He would either try and charge off in a panic or try and kick them. It took me a while to realize this was mostly caused by the crupper pulling on his tail. At Christmas I bought him a new bridle with a hackamore that doesn't have the 'fluffy bit'. He immediately stopped trying to rub his nose all the time.

Over the winter I investigated the possibility of breeching and in the spring of 2008 made the change. This made a major improvement to Boris's attitude and from not wanting to go in front, he became much bolder and a much happier horse. Still rather spooky though, which meant when he moved sideways the saddle did not always stay with him, and therefore, nor did I! I still couldn't mount from the ground.



I then had 10 months off riding, and Boris got sent away for some of this time to learn to play and socialize with other horses. From his terrified reaction when turned out with a group of geldings I suspect he had never been turned out with another horse since leaving his mother. When he came back he was a very happy boy and wanted me to play with him in the field. I was not keen – as I had had both of my feet in plaster for a good bit of the summer.

In February I felt ready to ride again, and had the saddle refitted to his now more adult shape. While we were testing the feel and fit of the saddle I mentioned that he kept stopping to scratch where the girth straps dropped below the numnah. After a bit of head scratching, I was told to try taking the girth straps out of the keepers on the numnah. This had the effect of letting the girth straps go much more forward under the narrow part of his belly without trying to pull the saddle forward with them. I could finally tighten the girth a bit more without pulling the saddle forward. Because I now had much more side to side stability things progressed much faster. We both gained in confidence and I could now cope with most of the spooks without the saddle going sideways. I still could not mount from the ground.

This left me with the forward motion problems we could now go a lot faster, but as Boris shortens in trot, and shortens even more in canter, the breeching was letting the saddle come forward in trot by a couple of inches, and in canter by 3 or 4 inches. With such a short backed horse this was giving him and therefore me a real problem - he bucks when really annoyed.

In September I had a call from my saddler he was modifying a saddle for Boris if I was prepared to try it. There were then one or 2 phone calls while he worked on a prototype, and then he came and fitted the saddle and rode out with me so that we could try it at all paces and on the hills. Eureka – because my saddler designs and rides in his own saddles I now have a saddle that moves not more than an inch, whatever the horse does underneath it. Yes it looks a bit odd, but the horse is happy with it and moves really well as it does not restrict him in any way. I no longer need the breeching to keep things in place. When the horse spooks I go with him. When he bucks I don't get catapulted into orbit. **I can now mount from the ground and the saddle doesn't move!**



If you see a little grey Arab with this saddle you will know immediately that it is Boris. If you have an Arab have a good look at the saddle and the shape of the horse. There are a lot of Arabs about with a similar shape.

Val Cammock



Sweat marks after a two hour ride

For more information click on:

