

## Why Treeless?

Treeless saddles are flexible, soft and feather-light, so they may ease back pain in both horse and rider.

Without the barrier of a stiff wooden tree, you can suddenly feel your horse's rhythm and work with it. Your horse reacts to subtle aids and cues. But most importantly, your horse is finally free from the pain of shifting or pinching hard saddle trees! He will enjoy going through his full range of motion without fear of being bruised. And make no mistake, even a well-fitting conventional saddle will cease to lay flat on the horse's back as soon as the horse takes a step, and will bridge, rocker or shift.

There is just too much movement in the back: it not only lifts or dips a few inches, it also lengthens and shortens! A stiff-treed saddle is like wooden clogs or ski boots: Yes, some may fit (many don't), but they are never really comfortable, or allow us to run freely. They change our walk, and the hard parts hurt after a while. Your horse wants a saddle made like a running shoe, with flexible support and cushioning!

An expensive, custom-made or professionally-fitted treed saddle may have been the most horse-friendly option during the past century. Not any more! Today, new, elastic materials allow us to build saddles that follow the movement of the horse's back, yet still provide security and support for the rider. The future is treeless!

If you have a number of differently proportioned horses a treeless saddle might be the most economical choice for you. Not everyone can afford a different saddle for each of their horses and the treeless can fit your whole herd! They can be used on wide or narrow horses and fit well on horses of average proportions but, DO NOT fit well on very high withered or extremely mutton withered horses. They do fit low withered horses as long as an anti-slip pad is used with them.

Treeless saddles are also light weight and easy to lift onto the horse's back and can make saddling easier for people with back, neck or shoulder problems. Since there is no wood or fibreglass beneath the leather seat, these saddles are very flexible and form fit to your horse's back and also to your body. There is actually more communication between you and your horse because you can feel the muscles in the horse's back and he (or she) can feel your seat bones push down when you back, stop, or turn your horse.

A mounting block is recommended when mounting a treeless or a treed saddle. It's kinder to the horse using a mounting block, especially if you are a bigger person.

As to the rider's seat size you should definitely go to the manufacturer's web site and use their style of measuring your thigh and factoring in your height and weight before deciding on which size seat to order. The treeless saddle will wrap around your proportions.

Try out the saddle before you make your final decision as to buy or not to buy. You know the saddle will fit your horse's back as long as he is shaped like the average horse. So, you need to ride one to see if you like the feel of having no tree and to see if you like the way the pommel and cantle are positioned on the saddle. Many manufacturer's have demo models but, you must pay shipping back and to.

One fact about the treeless saddle is that they are QUIET. There's no leather-rubbing-leather squeak to scare that colt you are starting or to mask the sound nature while out on a pleasant trail ride.

When it comes to saddles, design and materials only play a small part in the saddle's ability to distribute weight. People think, rightly or wrongly, that the larger the bearing surface, the better the weight distribution but this is not necessarily the case, especially with treeless saddles because flexibility does not distribute weight in the same way as rigidity. The important factor and what should be focused on first and foremost is that the saddle offers little or no restriction to the horse and this is one of the major benefits of treeless over treed, no matter the make or style.

If for instance, a treed saddle that had large wide weight bearing panels that covered a larger area of the horse's back did not follow the contours of the back and was not wide enough through the front of the tree to allow full movement and unrestricted rotation of the shoulders, the weight distribution ratio would not be even and a large percentage would be carried on the trapezius either side of the withers and not much more. As it is with even the best fitting saddles, there is more weight carried forward than to the rear and

this is a combination of design features of ours and the horse's body, the way we have to ride them, the design of the saddle and how the stirrups and girthing are rigged. Just having a tree does not automatically mean our weight is better distributed and more often than not, the weight distribution can be worse.

What really needs to be addressed is not that the weight is constantly being distributed evenly throughout that saddle's panels, but that the pressures from weight can fluctuate and be constantly on the move so that no area of the horse's back is under continual pressure. This is where treeless has the benefit over treed due to the flexibility but then relies a little more on the rider's ability to be aware of their position and how they distribute their own weight. The weight of the rider may be a factor but it isn't necessarily the most important. Heavy weight riders can ride lightly and more balanced than some of their much lighterweight counterparts.

Maybe not all but certainly most horses are happy to be ridden bareback and certainly some prefer this to being ridden in a treed saddle. When we ride bareback, the only area we have to distribute our weight is our bum cheeks and upper-inner thigh so this is one time when those of us with "20% extra free" can be of benefit! If you think about it, mankind and horses managed very well this way for a few thousand years until someone decided they needed to put a forked wooden block on their horses backs. Now when riding bareback, there is no rigid interface between horse and rider leaving two soft and flexible entities working together. This means your body is constantly making small adjustments to move "with" the horse and therefore keeping the pressures from weight constantly moving and to some degree this is how it works with treeless. What really makes things difficult is our need for stirrups and this is where materials and design play a part but the biggest part needs to be played by the rider in ensuring that the stirrups are used as a balancing aid to rest ones feet in rather than a strut to support them.

When it comes down to it, do your research but above all ask your horse's opinion because the most up-to-date technical designs and the most expensive materials will mean diddly squat to the horse because only they will know when they're comfortable."

Traditional saddles are built with a tree made from wood, fiberglass, rawhide, or steel. The theory is that the tree spreads the weight evenly across the horse's back. Unfortunately treed saddles also cause pressure point soreness, pinching, and behavior problems due to pain. It can be very costly and time consuming to find a treed saddle that fits. When you do it will fit that horse and likely will not give proper fit to the other horses in your barn. Changes in the horse's weight or conditioning can alter saddle fit and you are back to square one, looking again for the elusive saddle that fits.

Why ride a treeless saddle? Three key factors are fit, comfort, and versatility. Finding a saddle to fit your horse can be like finding a needle in a haystack. In most instances a saddle that has been ridden in is not returnable, and you don't know if you have a good fit until you ride in the saddle! I know people that have gone through ten or twelve saddles trying to find a good fit for their horse. No sooner do they get settled in and the horse's condition or weight changes and they are looking again, or their horse is developing pressure sores or behavioral problems related to saddle fit. The treeless saddle solves this fitting issue. Your horse can gain weight or lose weight and the saddle still fits. Often a treeless saddle will fit multiple horses in the same barn, making the treeless an excellent choice for those on limited budgets needing a saddle that will serve double duty and multiple purposes.

## **Features**

- Lightweight - under 10lbs.
- Saddle does not cause pressure points as treed saddles can.
- Regular tack shop accessories can be used.
- Provides rider with a comfortably narrow twist.
- Natural breathable materials allow heat to dissipate from horse.

- Shock absorbing construction.
- Permits full freedom of movement through shoulder and loin area.
- Fits horses of any width
- Close contact feel
- Affordable

### ***Benefits***

- A shock absorbing ride for you & your horse
- Freedom of movement for your horse
- Rider support front to back and side to side
- Extremely close contact ride
- Easy to use / lightweight / affordable

### ***Recommendations***

- That adequate saddle padding be used, according to discipline and rider/horse requirements. Your saddle pad should have a contoured topline as well as padding on either side of the spine, but not on the spine.
- Breastplates recommended for safety
- Self-centering girth - to have an even pull on the rigging
- Elastic in the girth - for breathing room
- Nylon stirrups - to keep weight down and for safety
- Breakaway Stirrups, Safety cages or tapaderos
- Sheepskin seat covers for ultimate comfort

### ***Limitations***

Not recommended for riders over 200lbs.

Not recommended for prominent withered horses or Green Riders who rely on a saddle to remain on a horse.

First we have to ask the question: Why do trees cause problems?

But from a rider and trainer's point of view, most of us have known for years that saddles cause problems. Most people experience problems with saddles and it is common to hear of frustrated riders spending large sums on saddle after saddle that for one reason or another just don't work. It is also common to hear of made to measure saddles failing, although this is not as surprising as it sounds as the saddle may well fit in theory on a static horse, but becomes a problem as soon as the horse actually moves. And, as we are all aware, horses change shape constantly throughout their lives. For example, in just a week, a fluctuation of 3 kilos in weight is perfectly normal. The horse carries most of his stored fat deposits over his top line, so even small variations in weight will immediately affect saddle fit.

### **What are the problems?**

- a) The tree points. Most people have seen a saddle stripped down to the tree, and understand that in order to protect the spine from the tree, the gullet has to be wide enough to allow movement and high enough to give wither and spinal clearance. But few people have perhaps fully understood the design and function of the tree points. The front arch that forms the pommel extends down either

side into points, just like a clothes peg. It is made of a broad band of steel over the arch, tapering into points that are shaped like table knives. The tips of these are supported by the trapezius muscle, which lies behind the shoulder blade on either side of the withers. Even with careful fitting, a roomy gullet and a well-flocked panel, the pressure caused by the tree points can cause nerve damage and atrophy of the muscles. Narrower horses are particularly susceptible to this clothes peg effect which will also cause lateral pinching as soon as the horse tries to turn or bend. Over time, these horses show the tell tale hollows either side of the withers.

- b) The stirrup bars. The only part of the structure of the tree that is strong enough to support the stirrup bar is the front arch. This means that all the weight that is loaded onto the stirrup by the rider is taken directly into the tree points, adding to the pressure into the muscle. Bigger horses tend to have heavier riders, so we tend to see greater depletion of the muscle and increased hollows.
- c) Scapula push. As the horse moves his forelimbs, the scapula (shoulder blade) swings forwards and backwards like a pendulum. At the point where it is furthest back, the forelimb is at its greatest point of load bearing. At this moment, the scapula pushes against the tree point on that side, causing the whole tree to pivot and the back of the saddle to rotate across the back. The scapula can become restricted or even bruised and the stride pattern will alter, causing shortening, choppiness or even unlevelness. Where there is a lot of bulk around the back of the shoulder due to conformation (e.g. loaded or wide shoulders) or excessive fat deposits, this will push against the tree points even more and the clothes peg effect will cause rolling; the whole saddle may even slip out of position. Because of this, wide shoulders offer more of a challenge to saddle-fitters.

### **Symptoms of saddle problems**

One gets used to a wide range of routine problems encountered in the training and development of the horse under saddle. Most horses are fairly stoical in their role as people-carriers, and will put up with an astonishing amount of pain and discomfort, sometimes displaying symptoms that are too subtle to be readily diagnosed.

### **So what exactly is a “normal” problem?**

- Resentment of being saddled or girthed
- Reluctance to go forward or rushing
- Tense or hollow outline, bridle lameness
- Teeth grinding, poll tilting and tail swishing
- Crooked, unlevel or stiff
- Loss of rhythm
- Above bit in transitions
- Disunited / breaking canter, or favouring one lead
- Resistance, nappiness or spookiness
- Stumbling or stilted going down hills
- Short striding, or difficulty in lengthening the stride
- On the forehand, lacking swing in the back
- Reluctance to stretch the top line or work deep

### **Jumping is worse!**

At the moment of landing, as the horse's front feet touch the ground, the scapula is extended forward and the muscles behind it are stretched and vulnerable. The rider's weight is concentrated onto the tree points as horse and rider's full force touches down. If you add the extra concussive effect from hard ground or a drop landing, this impact onto the points is enormous. Anticipation of the landing may lead to:

- Rushing, or excitable
- Backing off or refusing
- Poor technique or bascule
- Faulty parabola
- Pecking, stumbling or grunting on landing

- Bucking on landing
- Rushing away from the fence
- Carelessness, unexpected lack of scope
- Cat jumping or dropping the hindlegs early

The list is endless! In fact, we get so used to dealing with any of these symptoms on a daily basis, that we think of them as perfectly normal.

But what if they were NOT normal?

### **So why does treeless work?**

I have been training and competing in treeless saddles for four years and in that time have observed that problems that I had previously considered “normal” began to disappear. Without the clothes peg effect of the tree points restricting the shoulder and surrounding musculature, the forehead suddenly frees up and horses can more readily find their natural balance. Young horses improve confidence and older horses become happier. All the horses that I have tried in treeless saddles have changed – some more dramatically than others, but without exception, all have improved. Mentally, I would say that their tendency is to be more forward thinking, confident, calm, willing, able to concentrate, and less spooky, resistant, defensive, evasive, naughty etc. The physical changes are a result of this - improved musculature and more power, elasticity and expression.

The jumping saddle has produced similarly dramatic results – calmer, cleaner jumping, with improved technique. I feel that the horses are not just able to use their shoulders better, they are also less worried about the tree points slamming in to the back of the scapula on landing. I also find that they don't tire as quickly and can concentrate longer. In fast work, horses that I had previously been thought to have a poor natural gallop learned to lower and flatten the frame and significantly developed the stride length.

The good thing about treeless saddles is that it finally gives riders a choice. The result is a greater awareness of saddle issues and long-term benefit to the horse.

There are significant welfare implications in the development and use of the treeless concept. Amongst some of the other advantages, I have found that:

- In training:
  - Backing young horses is much easier as they don't seem to mind the girth. Even if they do tighten against it initially, there are no tree points to tighten back into them, which is what frightens them and can lead to freezing or bucking.
  - The treeless can be fitted to any horse, regardless of conformation problems.
  - Horses tire less quickly, both physically and mentally.
  - The stride is freer therefore longer – this has wide ranging implications for dressage, endurance and eventing.
  - Problem horses can benefit – those with cold-backed syndrome, kissing spines and other back conditions.
  - Even where tree point damage has caused muscle atrophy, when tree use is discontinued, there can be considerable rejuvenation, particularly in younger horses.
- There are safety considerations too:
  - The treeless is easy to fit, making it straightforward for anyone to use without fear of causing damage to the horse.
  - If the horse should roll or fall on the saddle, he will not injure himself with it.
  - Should the horse fall and trap the rider underneath, the saddle will not cause injury to the rider.
- The rider benefits too:
  - A particular bonus is the positioning of the stirrup bars which are not restricted to being placed on the tree points, but are positioned for optimum rider balance, making a tremendous difference to comfort and security. Riders are able to adopt a correct position more easily, and also to self-correct.

- There is no concussion or push from a rigid frame, making it exceptionally good for riders' backs too.
- Because the horse can more clearly feel the rider and his slightest position changes, he is able to respond more easily to subtle aids.
- Similarly, the rider can feel every movement in the horse's back, helping in the precision of those aids.
- The soft, flexible seat allows the rider to spend extended periods in the saddle without seat bone ache.
- Treeless is efficient and cost-effective:
  - The rider only needs one saddle for life, because it can be fitted to any horse.
  - No re-flocking, expensive tree repairs or rigid parts to cause wear.
  - Being extremely lightweight makes it easy to carry and to lift. It can be rolled up and transported in a sports bag, or even a flight bag.

The "out of the box" thinking that has been responsible for the development of the treeless concept is still highly controversial. Traditionalists argue that saddles need trees in order to protect the spine. This viewpoint also concedes that it is necessary to protect the horse from the tree. The result is a compromise, but one, which many would maintain, has worked well enough for centuries. But perhaps there is a better way of achieving the aims of comfort and functionality other than just continually improving the same concept. Perhaps it is time for an alternative, even if it means a radical change. There is a growing band of thinking riders who have made the quantum leap of faith and have not looked back.