

# THE ROLE OF EQUESTRIAN PROFESSIONALS

## in Saddlery Fit for Horse & Rider

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**H**orse owners have a responsibility to ensure that all saddlery, i.e. saddle, bridle and bit are suitable for the horse and fit the horse well. This is not always an easy or straightforward task however. Due to fluctuations in the horse's back musculature and body condition, saddle fit can alter significantly in as little as a couple of months, warranting regular saddle fit checks (Greve and Dyson, 2015). Bridle and bit fit are rather less sensitive than saddle fit to changes over time (Antilla et al. 2022), but arguably no less important for the comfort of the ridden horse.

**Given the complexities of tack selection and fitting, how can horse owners ensure that their equipment is suitable and that it fits their horse?**

This is where the team surrounding the horse owner, including the musculoskeletal therapist, can assist. Recent work carried out by Hartpury University in collaboration with the Society of Master Saddlers aimed to find out how professionals within a multidisciplinary team currently engage with horse owners on matters of saddlery fit, how they do it and what they consider to be the key issues in saddle, bridle and bit fit.

Saddle fitters, coaches and musculoskeletal therapists responded to an online survey in which it was discovered that there is considerable overlap in professional



responsibility for saddle fit amongst the multidisciplinary team, with two-thirds of coaches and therapists saying that they 'nearly always' or 'very often' assess saddle fit as part of their professional service (MacKechnie-Guire et al. 2024). The method of assessment of saddle fit varied between professions, with saddle fitters most often assessing saddle fit in the stable and when ridden. Coaches' responses suggest they most often consider saddle fit during observation of the stationary horse whilst therapists said it "depends upon the nature of the assessment" perhaps reflecting the relatively greater proportion of horses within the therapist's caseload that are unable to undertake ridden work at the time the assessment is made. To a Society of Master Saddlers Qualified Saddle Fitter, assessment of saddle fit should occur under the circumstances the saddle is to be used, i.e. horse and rider working normally, however, this may not be possible when a horse is being re-introduced to ridden work following injury. Scenarios such as these present opportunities for saddle fitter and therapist to work together in managing the needs of the horse and the clients' expectations. When re-introducing ridden work, the therapist seeks reassurance that the saddle the owner intends to use will not hinder any progress that has been made in rehabilitation, whilst the fitter is perhaps unable to see the horse ridden in walk, trot and canter and therefore unable to carry out a full assessment. In such circumstances, it is likely that some adjustment or even replacement of a saddle may be necessary within a short period of return to full work.



There was considerable overlap in the most frequent issues of saddle fit reported by the three professions despite some differences in language used. Therapists were more likely to report that a saddle “just does not fit”, perhaps reflecting a caseload which includes horses for which the saddle is a contributing factor to an orthopaedic issue (Burns et al. 2018), and/or a horse which has recently experienced significant changes in back musculature (for better or worse). Fitters found saddles more likely to be ‘down at the front’ than ‘down at the back’ although ‘front-back balance’ and ‘saddles slipping to one side’ were the most frequent saddle fit issues reported by all professions. Commonality in key issues encountered suggests there could be shared goals between professions, which is encouraging for effective

multidisciplinary team working to support horse owners achieve and maintain saddle fit. The more vigilance surrounding saddle fit and the more those within a multidisciplinary team can work together, the more likely the horse owner is to be supported in achieving optimal saddle fit.

As well as fitting the horse, the saddle should place the rider in the best position for the horse to support their weight. The most frequent saddle fit issue for the rider as encountered by saddle fitters was that the “saddle tips the rider forwards”. This concurs with the most frequent saddle fit issue “saddle down at the front” as reported by saddle fitters which would have the knock-on effect of pitching the rider forwards (MacKechnie-Guire et al. 2019).

All three professions cited ‘saddle seat too small’ within their top three issues in saddle fit for the rider. Whilst the most obvious explanation for this is a mismatch between the size of the horse and the size of the rider; the shape of the seat, the tree, the length of the rider's thigh, even the stirrup length adopted could all contribute to the declaration that that the saddle seat is too small. If the rider has a regular coach, it may be worth working with them to identify if any performance issues and/or recurring musculoskeletal discomfort might be alleviated by addressing fundamental horse-rider mismatch and/or rider position in the saddle.

“Saddle slipping to one side” was a commonly perceived issue in both saddle fit for the horse and the rider. Greve and Dyson (2014) suggested that saddle slip was not always recognised by coaches so perhaps the last decade has brought greater awareness now of the potential link between saddle slip and hindlimb lameness and of the effect saddle slip can have on the horse (MacKechnie-Guire et al. 2018). Seemingly saddle slip is now more likely to prompt a discussion between members of the MDT and the horse owner leading to action to tackle the primary cause.

'THE SOCIETY OF MASTER SADDLERS'







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The survey found that coaches led the way in asking clients whether or not they'd had their horse's bridle fitted, whilst assessment of bridle and bit fit by saddle fitters and therapists was considerably less than saddle fit (Nankervis et al. 2024a). In fact, less than twenty-five percent of therapists said they "nearly always" or "very often" assess the fit of the bridle and bit. Problems with the noseband featured most highly amongst the top three bridle fitting issues encountered by all professions. Coaches and therapists agreed on the top three issues regarding bridle fit, i.e. "noseband too tight", "noseband too low" and "browband too small". Saddle fitters also reported "browband too small" as a key issue along with the noseband and headpiece design. Whilst 'browband too small' may be a true reflection of the use of an inappropriate size browband, it may also be secondary to suboptimal design of other elements of the bridle causing the headpiece to encroach on the base of the ears.

With many more options of bridle design on the market these days, it is worth remembering that fundamentally, the bridle should fit, regardless of whether or not it has a generic anatomical design. A recent study found that in a population of 554 horses and ponies presented for dental examination, bits that were too thick, and or incorrect length, were common (Antilla et al. 2022). In the survey, coaches and therapists reported issues regarding 'suitability' more often than issues of fit per se. Responses also suggested that since components of the bridle and bit in combination can lead to inappropriate fit, neither bridle nor bit fit can be properly considered in isolation.

Various professionals within the multidisciplinary team surrounding horse and rider have some degree of professional responsibility for ensuring equipment is suitable and fits. So how can you work more effectively with colleagues for improvement in horse comfort? Always find out who fitted your clients saddle, and how long ago it was seen. If you have concerns about saddle fit, suggest that the saddle fit is checked, preferably by the person who fitted it most recently. Avoid being drawn by the client on specific aspects of the fit of the saddle; you may find it easier to focus on the aspects of the horse musculature, muscle tone or reactivity that you may need the fitter's help to

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address. A study of saddle fitters experiences of working within a multidisciplinary team found that direct practitioner to practitioner communication was less likely to lead to misunderstanding than communicating via the horse owner (Nankervis et al 2024b). With the owners' permission, a simple phone call between practitioners can be the start of a productive and rewarding working relationship and was highly valued by saddle fitters.

Since the introduction of saddle fitting qualifications in the U.K. in the 1990s, saddle fitting has evolved considerably, with correct saddle fit widely acknowledged as a crucial part of horse husbandry. Qualifications in bridle and bit fitting are relatively new, with most only becoming available within the last 5-10 years. Both the Society of Master Saddlers website ([www.mastersaddlers.co.uk/members/](http://www.mastersaddlers.co.uk/members/)) and the recently developed Equine Fitters Directory ([www.equinefittersdirectory.org/](http://www.equinefittersdirectory.org/)) can be used to help you and your clients find qualified fitters in your area. Excellent resources on fitting can be found on the Society of Master Saddlers website ([www.mastersaddlers.co.uk/category/fitting-resources/](http://www.mastersaddlers.co.uk/category/fitting-resources/)) as well as details of upcoming introductory courses on fitting for those who simply wish to increase their level of knowledge. With increased awareness, and further cooperation between all professions surrounding the horse owner, we should see continued improvement in the level of saddlery fit for all our ridden horses.

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