

There is a lot of confusion and misinformation around on line that makes it a little difficult for buyers of saddles to pick a new saddle for their horse. Most people love their horse and want to do the right time by it in terms of comfort and fit. The rider also needs to be secure, comfortable and safe.

I wrote this historical evolution as a guide to the saddles available today and the design concepts behind their development and to answer many questions I get asked almost daily.

The Difference between western saddles and so called English saddles.

When we look at the core differences between western saddle and English saddles there are two main differences in the design.

One is the way they each distribute the weight of the rider to the horses back.

The second main difference is the western saddle has the “stirrup “set through holes in the tree.

The English saddle has stirrups set on stirrup bars, set well forward of where they are positioned on a western saddle.

Under each of these main heading’s subsets evolved.

The Original Mongolian saddle went through a number of reintegration, evolving into the so called western saddle. The modern western saddle evolved different “swells” and seat for specific use. The roping saddle, the western dressage, the western show saddle but the basic design concept is the same. The so called fender “stock saddle” evolves partly from this stem and partly from the English saddle hence the name Half bread saddle.

The English saddle also evolved into different subsets, jumping saddles, dressage saddles ect but again the basic design concepts remain consistent. The Australian stock saddle evolved from this stem.

The pictures below start to show the difference.

This is a modern Wade Western saddle.



An example of the English saddle and the use it was designed for is captured in the picture of the jump saddle pictured below.



War is often credited with being a driver of technology. Both these design concepts were evolved and had a historical context that in war.

The Western saddle traces its origins back to the early 1200's . Yes 800 plus years. The most famous user of this style of saddle was Genghis Khan. He took over 100,000 men and 500,000 horses 3000 kilometer from Mongolia to the gates of Vienna. If you can take 100,000 men 3000 kilometers it proves the design of his saddles on his little horses works.



The short bow and a mounted force was the difference between the Mongol Army and everybody else. The Mongol's won. The superpower of the time. Their military technology of saddle, composite bow and the way they used these were the dominant technology of their age.

The horses were between 12 and 14 hands. So considered small by English standards. The saddles large.

So this is the point we run into one of the MYTHS circulated by advocates of English style saddles and so called saddle fitters. There is a myth they push that all saddles should be short and sit not greater than level with the 14 rib. You can teach a parrot to sing the chorus, but it does not make it true. Consistently repeating a myth can get a bunch of people to believe it to be true. The result many people are struggling to reconcile what the myth or even paid saddle fitter is saying and the reality they see when they go to a modern polocrosse game or camp draft.

The Mongol Army, the modern western saddle, the modern camp draft saddle, of half bread saddle all debunk this myth. It simply is not true. It may be for jumping but not as a general unqualified rule.

Need more evidence or later example of a big rider, big saddle on a small horse.



Bob Long racing across the Mongolian steppe during the 2019 Mongol Derby.

The tree.

When we look at the tree under these different designs, we see the evolution.

The picture below is a shop selling modern Mongol saddles. The design has not changed much since the year 1200.

The top part of the saddle has changed, and yes, the show saddle, roping saddle etc. are different if we examine the top view but the basic design of the weight bearing panels has not changed.

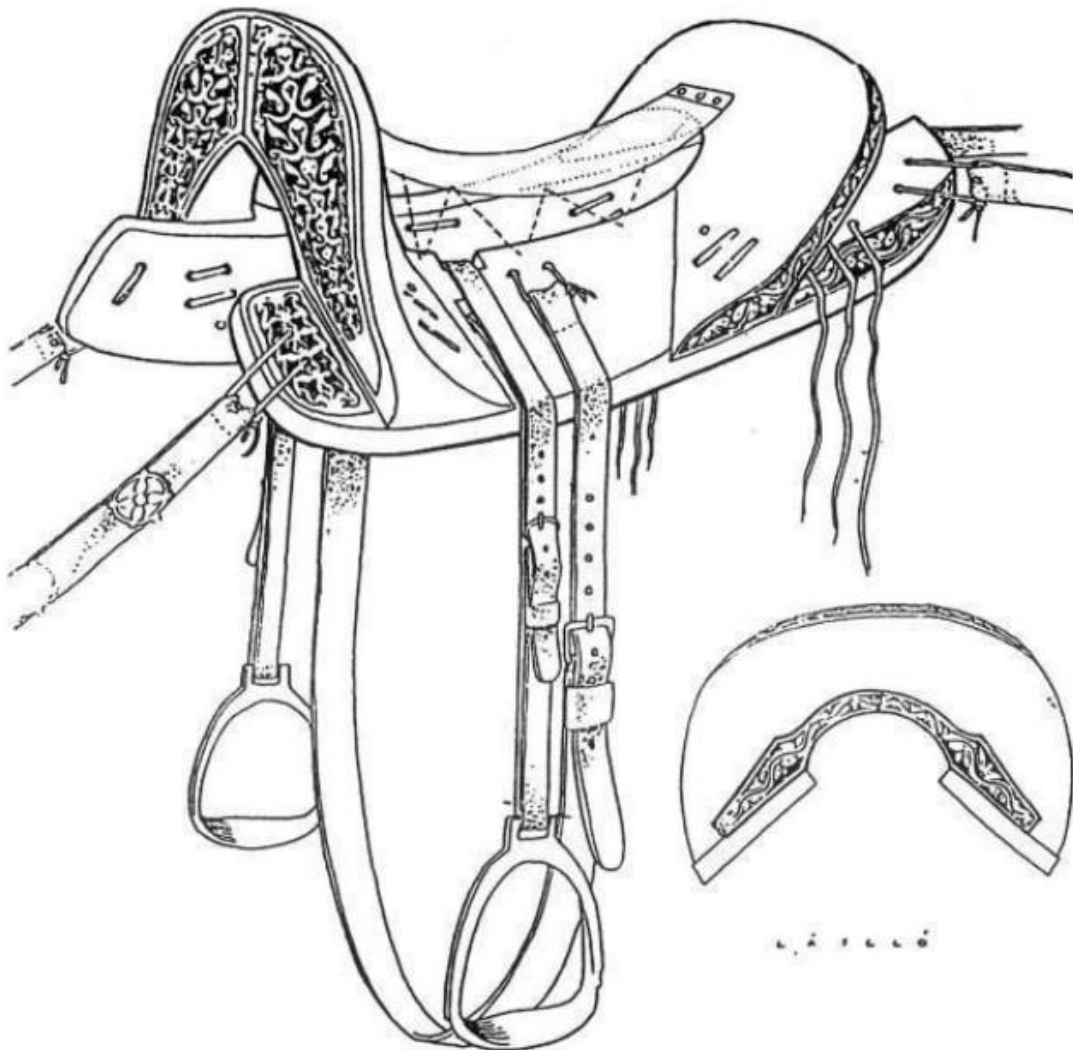
The principle is a large surface are distributing the weight so the pressure pe square inch is low. Reduce the surface area and distribute the same weight and you have a higher pressure per square inch of surface are.

Roman cavalry and the Greek cavalry of Alexander the great **did not have a stirrup**. This device was introduced to Europe by invading tribes including the Mongols and their allies after the collapse of the western **Roman** Empire.

How the stirrup is attached to the saddle is one of the important differences we will look at between so called western saddles and English saddles.



When I was researching this article I found many very interesting pictures of saddles dating back 800 years. There were interesting archaeological finds from the middle ages all showing the gradual evolution.



The reconstruction of a woman's saddle from Soltszentimre

This is one of the best drawing of the period that shows the points in discussion

The weight of the rider is distributed along the two bars on each side of the saddle.

The stirrup is attached by holes in the saddle not off a stirrup bar.

For people looking to take this further it is interesting to compare this style of saddle to the design of our Australian light horse saddle used in WW1.

The modern wade tree is pictured below and the reader can see the evolution.

Wade

SEAT: 16"

CANTLE: 4½" x 13" x 1¼"

SWELL: 9"

WOOD POST HORN: 3¼ high, 3¼ cap



The Mongol saddle spread through Europe . The modern Spanish Bull fighting saddle is a good example. The Spanish went to the new world. The Americans added a horn for roping and changed the top half , seat . The basic design stayed the same. The so-called western saddle is really only a central Asian design with modifications.

Sorry, there goes another myth.

The name western saddle has a romantic link to the old west that may be more marketable than the name central Asian saddle.

The American cowboy horse had some similarities to the Mongol horses. Basically both were “wild “ horse, or horse bred on big herds on open plains. No selective breeding. The result is the small stocky type. The Mongol horse, the Mustang, the Brumby, all so called wild horse breeds will all revert to a short, thicker 12 to 14 hands type if in breeding continues over time.

The American Quarter horse did not evolve from these wild so called cow ponies. The Quarter horse was evolved by selectively in breeding an English thoroughbred. The key reason for this was to be a short distance sprint horse. The cow myth came much latter. Cow sense was developed but much later. Sorry, there goes another myth.

The cowboy went to the open grass lands in southern USA along, or over depending on who’s account you read, the Mexican border. Free wild cattle, free wild horses.

These cowboys only wanted to round up the free cattle and drive them to the markets in the growing cities. They did not want the land; they did not want to waste time building yards they

would only use once. To handle this open plain working of cattle they developed a skill set of roping and cutting. The modern sports evolved from this early need.

We Australians wanted the land. We settled the land, built yards water points, and worked and sorted the cattle in a very different way. So, our camp drafting is very different and hence the saddle we use very different. The horse skills very different.

The Mongol style saddle had evolved to the Spanish saddle and adding of a horn was the American contribution.

The wide bars distribute the weight over a big surface area of the horses back. there is no soft padding shock absorber as we will find in the English saddle.

What this big surface area did was provide is what is called lateral stability. That is the weight of the rider, or even a roped cow, could be pulled from side to side. I will come back to this point in the evolution of the half-bred saddle later.

The English tree.

When we look at the English saddle, we see a short saddle. There is no long bars to distribute the weight over a big surface area. There is a stirrup bar mounted well forward or where you find the stirrup holes on a western saddle.

If we have a short saddle with a small surface area to displace the rider's weight, so we need a shock absorber to prevent hurting the horses back. By definition any shock absorber under the saddle must set it higher.





When I searched Wikipedia we find some interesting short notes.

The ENGLISH hunt /jump saddle

Evolved During the 18th century, most riders in Europe used high-pommel and cantle **saddles**, with a wooden frame for classical dressage. This **saddle** was based on a model used for bull fighting, cattle work, long-distance travel, and mounted combat, as its high pommel and cantle helped to provide the rider with support.

Many years ago the panels of English saddles were stuffed with horse hair or kapok. Nowadays most English saddles are stuffed with either closed cell or other type of foam or a mixture of wool and acrylic fibres, depending on the style of the saddle.

If we go back to the picture of the show jumper, we see a very different way of riding.

The rider's weight is central, directly over the horse, equally distributed on both sides. Unlike the saddles designed for cattle work there is no need for lateral support. The rider simply does not throw the weight from one side to another as they do in say polo or cross-country or camp drafting.

The picture below is a Napoleonic period French Lancer. He has a nice short lance with a sharp metal point.

He is widely believed to be the motivating force behind the rapid development of the English Jumping saddle in the 1800's.



In an indirect way he helped develop the modern sport of Eventing or Cross Country.

I said earlier war hastens technology.

In the 1800 's the British were playing games generally referred to as the Napoleonic Wars with the French in Europe.

One game involved sending some riders out along the roads and tracks until they found the French. When they spotted the French, they wrote down their location, number of guns, number of people and any points of interest the generals may find interesting. Then take this information back to their line.

This was the point the game started. The French lancer would chase the Englishman. The little pointed lance was a good motivator to take the most direct route back to the British lines. A straight-line back was the shortest back. So, over the fields, over the hedge rows over the streams and over the brick fences. Fast, with French lancer in hot pursuit. You can see why a good horse was a prized possession. There are some fine poems of the period lamenting a death or loss of a friend because the horse would not cross a stream or would not jump a fence and the rider meet a French Lancer up close.

Once you understand the motivation for this unusual route home you can understand why British developed the English hunting seat, or forward seat. Basically, the modern jumping “stance”.

To facilitate the jumping stance the British developed a stirrup bar mounted well forward of every other saddle of the time. A short saddle because only jumping gets the horse to the unusual shape we see above. Lateral stability was not important. English rider, jump or dressage don't ride to use lateral support. They stay central to the saddle leaning forward to jump. Light weight was important if I want to outrun the Frenchman.

To train the horse to do this job the English developed what they called Horse trials, basically training of a war horse. This developed into modern Eventing or Cross country.

The stirrup bar is the weakest point on a saddle. More often than not this is the place a saddle fails under heavy use. But, without the stirrup bar you cannot get the jumping or forward hunting seat. So, a trade off. Like so much in design. The advocates of the western saddle saying it is weak. The English fans saying it is the “only correct seat” and all other designs sit you wrong. This argument quickly escalated to you are wrong I am right. Until we get to where we are today where English riders and western riders just do not see eye to eye on very much to do with their horse. Reminds me of religion.

I would add a side comment. Modern Eventing only has three phases. Dressage, cross country and show jumping. Some time ago they dropped off the 4 th phase. Roads and tracks and steeple chase. Take this athletic faster work out of the event and the German warm blood comes into contention. With the faster sections the Australian horses won gold medals. Without this distance athlete stage, we have not won gold medals as a team in Eventing since Roycroft and his team in Rome in 1960.

There are some great stories about remarkable riders. Bill Roycroft would be among the best stories. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Roycroft

One story less well know is about his horses. Bill Roycroft was a farmer. He used his horses on the farm, he used them for polo and used them for polocrosse and he won gold in eventing. He believed a good athletic horse can do what ever task you allocate on the day.

He proved it because the horse he played polocrosse on won him a gold medal in Eventing. So there goes another myth on single use horses.

<https://www.smh.com.au/sport/from-the-archives-1960-roycroft-s-amazing-ride-at-rome-olympics-20200904-p55se3.html>





The English saddle developed into a number of slightly different variants for dressage, and different jump patterns but the base of all is a short saddle , with padded underside , and stirrups on the stirrup bar.

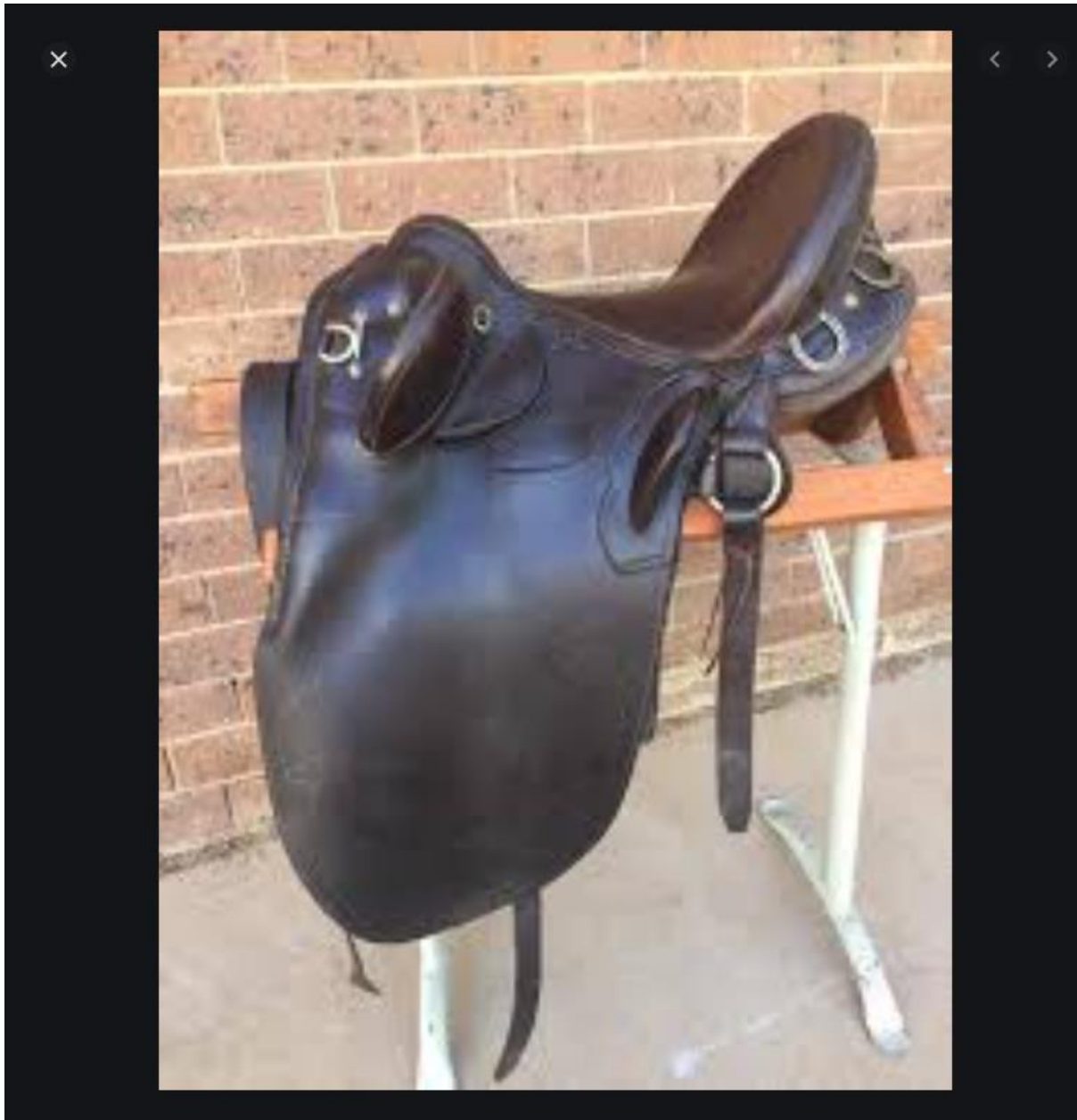
The Australian stock saddle

The English bring their saddles to Australia.

The best definition I found was on wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_Stock_Saddle

Initially the stock saddle was a "park" style saddle similar to the modern English showing saddle, with low set knee rolls and short flaps. However, this style of saddle did not suit the rugged Australian terrain and did little protect the rider's legs from sweat. Thus the flaps were lengthened, thigh and knee pads added, the seat deepened and the cantle raised. A saddlemaker named Jack Wieneke developed a design that was popular for a number of years, but the design over time became too extreme and lost favour to more conservative styles.



The tree was basically the English jump tree. The knee pads are hand done stitched to the top flap of the saddle . The twist was narrow. The stirrups were set on stirrup bars. The underside was “counter lined” or padded. Like an English saddle but more so.

So the stock saddle evolved from the English jump saddle but took with it the design NOT developed for the use it was later put to.

Remember the English saddle was designed to have the riders weight equally distributed on each side of the horse. NOT for violent movements left or right.

When our grassier went into poorer country the horses got thin. So we added padding to clear the wither. We added a myth. You should be able to look down the gullet of the saddle and see the tunnel all the way. In other words the saddle was padded so high it had a tendency to roll off the side of your horse.

As we went to wide breeds of horses, like the Quarter horse and played more sports like polocrosse and camp drafting this rolley polley effect was not popular. It hurts when you hit the dirt at speed. I can attest to this with a list of bones not currently in original condition. They nick names this high sitting design the “widow maker” because once it started to roll at speed and there was no way back. It is a slow burn to the bottom with what feels like all the time in the world to contemplate why you ever picked this type of saddle in the first place.

Horselines still makes a few saddles in the design, the picture below is a synthetic changeable gullet version. We do this saddle at half the price of the big brand makers. For light use it is fine. On very narrow or high withered horses it is fine. For heavy duty polocrosse or camp draft I believe we have other models better suited to the task.

We do this because some people want a short backed padded saddle because the saddle fitter told them this is what the need. If they believe this is what they need and order online, we send what the ordered. The saddle fitters push this belief because they push the changeable gullet design made by a supplier to the chain that pays the commissions for selling them.

<https://www.horselines.com.au/polocrosse-stock-special-changeable-gullet/106-traditional-style-synthetic-changeable-gullet-based-on-our-polocrosse-special-design.html>



The half breed Saddle.

Again, I turn to Wikipedia.

“Modern styles range from traditional models through to a newer "half breed" that incorporates the independent swinging fender and [stirrup](#) style of the [western saddle](#) with the traditional Australian tree and seat style”.

Let me unpack this. There is a lot hidden in this short sentence.



This is the Horselines model 7080 s I will use this as an example

<https://www.horselines.com.au/leather-stock-saddles/748-polocrosse-deluxe-texas-tea-model-7080s-fender-saddle.html>

This saddle has a close contact seat. In short the rider sits about 1 ¾ inch above the horse where as with some of the big padded stock saddle this rise was 3 inch and partly contributed to the rolley polley effect .

This modern saddle has a much bigger surface area on the underside , like a western saddle.

But the stirrups, like an English saddle are mounted forward like an English saddle. So, the rider sits in a very different position to a western saddle.

The myth of the fender.

The fender makes me sit different.

Not true. The fender, correctly done is just a wide stirrup leather. It should move like an English thin leather. The difference the wide surface area stops your leg from being pinched by the stirrup leather. It is, once it is broken in just a lot more comfortable to ride in.

The old stock saddle had knee pads, attached in the thigh pad position. Hand done to the top layer of leather.

An example of the hand done knee pad is the Polocrosse Deluxe 7080 pictured above

Much different position to the knee pad of a saddle made in the western way out of a one-piece tree. That is the knee pads are molded into the tree shape the same as a western saddle



<https://www.horselines.com.au/leather-stock-saddles/701-texas-tea-gumnut-embossed-campdrafter-saddle-gumnut-model-8085.html>

The Gumnut embossed model 8085 is an example of a modern saddle made out of a one-piece tree. You can clearly see the knee pads are in a different position.

Why do this? Cheaper and easier to make. Most modern fender saddles are made this way. We are one of a few saddle makers that keep a number of models in the old hand done knee pads.

I prefer the feel of the saddle in hand done position. Most women prefer this style of pad. Sit in both and try the difference in feel for yourself.

Why do people believe the fender makes me sit differently?

I suspect the first fender saddles people sat in were western saddles with the stirrup hung further back than they were used too. They blamed the fender itself instead of the position of the fender for this unusual feel. If you sit in a modern correctly done "fender stock saddle you will find you sit correctly. As defined but the pony club forward hunting seat, not long and loose like a 1930's stockman. The saddle is just much more comfortable. Technology evolves. Saddles get better as technology, the products we have available, and our understanding evolves.

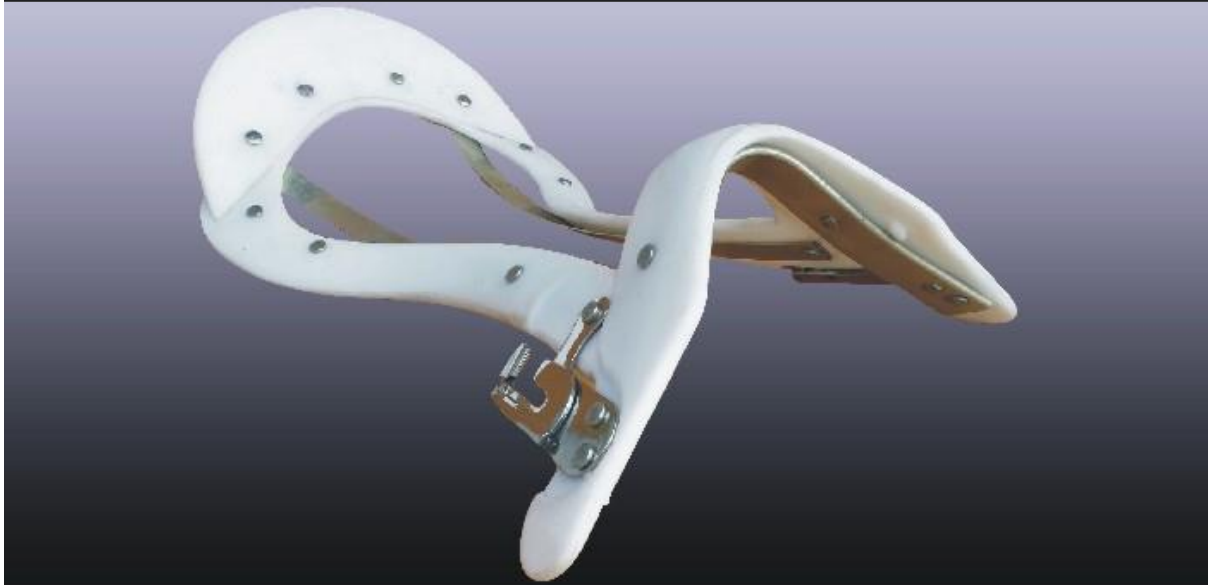
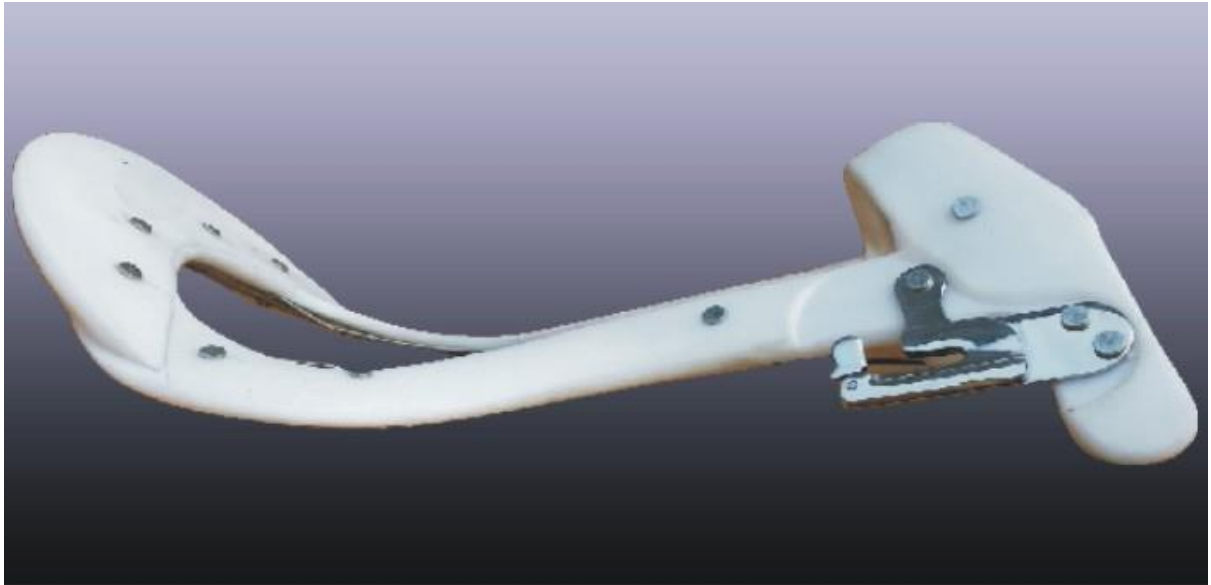


Changeable gullet fender saddles

There are a variety of ways of building the changeable gullet saddle.

Some more expensive than other methods.

The best known in Australia is a polypropylene tree with a selection of bars, hence changeable, that hold the gullet apart.





We do a range of fender changeable gullet stock saddle. Leather and synthetic.

The more modern fender stock saddle and the traditional design

The modern fender changeable gullet saddle is based off our very popular polocrosse deluxe design.

It has all the features of a much more expensive saddle.

It has hand done knee pads in the thigh pad position.

It has a much larger surface area underside giving both a close contact and, and by using neoprene padding it also has a built-in shock absorber for the comfort of your horses back.

By definition the fender close contact design has a larger skirt, hence is longer. This model is not short in fender saddle terms but will by definition be longer than the old traditional style.

We use "memory foam" on the underside. So, a thin neoprene material that gives us the best of two worlds. The wider skirt for lateral security, but it also means we had a little of the English "shock absorber" or self-adjustment into the underside. This layer is still thin like the felt layer used in many half-bred saddles but with a softer feel for both horse and rider.

The fenders are hung correctly on stirrup bars.

https://www.horselines.com.au/deluxe-fender-synthetic-changeable-gullet/1127-polocrosse-deluxe-synthetic-changeable-gullet-fender-stock-saddle-medium-and-large.html?search_query=change&results=16





This traditional model has the English underside, that is short, well-padded and therefore sits higher.

Many saddle fitters will tell you that you need a short stock saddle. This is the style they are talking about. Several different makers do this design. What is the disadvantage. It tends to roll on a wide horse.

This style has been around for many years and is still the main stock saddle pushed by many saddle shops and saddle fitters.

Disadvantage of changeable gullet saddles.

No changeable gullet saddle will be as strong as a properly made fixed tree competition saddle.

Look at the construction and materials and this becomes immediately obvious.

For light to medium work the changeable gullet is fine.

For heavy work like polocrosse or high-level camp drafting this construction method is not strong enough.

NO TOP POLOCROSSE PLAYER OR CAMPDRAFTER KNOW RIDERS IN A CHANGEABLE GULLET SADDLE.

Do I need a Changeable gullet? What if my horse grows?

Horses change shape as they grow and then grow old. Same as people.

The two or three year old pony fills out and rounds. The 10 or 11 year old in many cases starts to lose top line and the wither looks like it is growing. Horses change shape dramatically as we get them fit.

To illustrate the change the same saddle must still fit in one season.



This is my pony. His name is Koala. He is a full Australian stock horse from an ABBY mare. So an ASH blue blood. His father was an imported Quarter horse stallion then registered and branded as Australian Stock horse.

My pony is either full ASH (Australian Stock Horse) or a first cross quarter horse depending on which card I pull on the day. Like me he is tending to get thicker and rounder as he ages.

Below is the same pony when my daughter took him to the Nationals at Ballarat in 2010. Very different state of fitness.



So, from the start of a season to 18 weeks into a season the body shape has changed considerably.

Sandy and I ride in the same model Polocrosse Deluxe saddle. Sandy's saddle is one inch smaller than mine but the same fitting, gullet size etc.

My son Chris uses the same model saddle. In the same size as me.



At the start of every season the horse has been turned out to get over last season and grow fat. The first month is all about a slow process towards fitness. At the end of the 18 week season the pony look ready to race at Ascot.

Every polocrosse player and every camp drafter faces the same thing. A well-built modern saddle fits in all stages of fitness. We do not have four different saddles for different times of the year. Each of these horses are national level polocrosse ponies. It takes years to develop a horse to this level. Each is worth ten time the cost of the saddle and much harder to replace.

In the case of my pony, he has had the same model, I changed the actual saddle after 5 years but same model since I got him as a three year old. He is now 17 years old and still going at a good level.

In short, the saddle has not crippled him or shortened his career. So, it works. If it works at this level over this period of time the design is sound.

There is a much bigger range of fit built into a modern fixed tree saddle than most saddle fitters will lead you to believe. The ponies my son and daughter are sitting on are both Australian Stock Horses but each one has a different build. Same model saddle.

Give me a call and I am happy to explain this in more detail.

Please feel free to call me on 0409994409 to discuss any of this article in more detail. I would welcome you call.