

Seat Games - Another Key to Rider Comfort

Part One

By Terry Wagner

I can say without hesitation, that poorly designed saddle seats have been a great cause of discomfort in my life over the last 50 or more years. I have ridden some cheap saddles that were extremely comfortable, and I have ridden some real expensive custom made rigs that made me want to get off and walk after ten minutes, and vice versa. One thing is for certain, if the seat in your saddle isn't comfortable, you aren't going to ride very often or for very long at a time. Probably no part of a saddle is more important to the comfort of the rider than the seat. If the seat in your saddle is too short, too long, too wide, too narrow or the cantle not quite right, it will be uncomfortable.

I have owned a lot of different saddles over the years and done repair work on way more than I have owned. The first repairs I ever did for a paying customer was to add a padded seat to an older saddle and lots of saddle and leather shops get this request all the time. One thing I have learned from this is that seat comfort is the result of a properly designed seat rather than one filled with a lot of padding. A poorly designed seat with a lot of padding is just that; a poor seat with lots of stuffing. On the other hand, a properly designed seat doesn't require padding to be comfortable, but for some riders, a little padding can make it even more comfortable. I have to admit the older I get the more I appreciate a little padding as part of a comfortable saddle.

Seat size has a lot to do with comfort. If the seat is too long or too short, it will not place the rider in the proper position relative to the stirrup leathers and can make the rider feel like his stirrups are constantly too far forward or too far back, and create an uncomfortable ride. Also a seat that is too long or too short will not put the contours of the seat under a rider where they need to be to

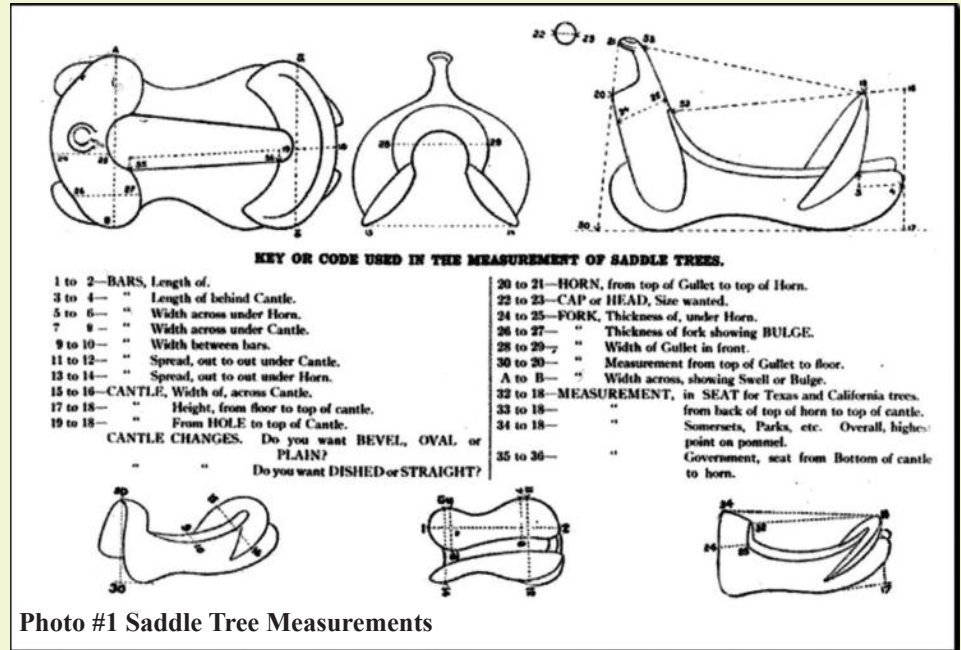


Photo #1 Saddle Tree Measurements

create a comfortable seat. If a seat is too wide you feel like you are going to split in half and if a seat is too narrow it feels like you're sitting on a fence rail.

Building a seat in a saddle is the most dynamic part of any saddle. Creating the seat is what comfort is all about. The overall seat dimensions will be the determining factor in your comfort as a rider. Many times I have heard riders say that a new saddle they just purchased is the same size as their old faithful they have ridden for years, but it just doesn't fit right. For starters, let's start with simple seat size, and this is where the seat games begin.

To start any conversation about saddle seats it is necessary to start with the tree the saddle is built on. Photo #1 is a rather imposing diagram showing all the measurements and angles a tree maker has to take into consideration when making a saddle-tree. For the purpose of this article we are going to confine ourselves to the basic parts and dimensions that seem to most affect the seat of a saddle. Basically a saddletree has four main parts, the fork, cantle, and two bars. Saddletrees are made of wood, or some kind of molded material. Wooden trees are covered with rawhide or some kind of polymer or fiberglass coating. Most recently, some tree makers are covering trees with Kevlar, the material used in bulletproof vests. Other saddletrees are injection or wet molded and usually have no external covering on them. Photos #2, #3, and #4, illustrate the most commonly used type of saddletrees.



Rawhide covered tree



Fiberglass covered tree



Molded saddle tree

#5



Twist in a western saddle tree

One of the terms we hear associated with a saddle seat is the twist. Twist starts with the basic tree. Twist is usually seen as the outside curve in the bars of the tree, as shown in Photo #5. This illustration from Dr. Joyce Harmon's book on western saddle fitting is a very simple illustration of twist in a western saddletree. The size of the twist is measured at the narrowest portion of the bars on the tree, as shown in photo #6. This width across the twist is the very first part of a saddletree that has an effect on the seat. English saddlers refer to this as the "waist" because it is the narrowest part of the tree. Many people have a tendency to fret about the twist in a saddle, when in fact the seat will be much more affected by how that

twist is treated as the seat is formed by the saddle maker. Keep in mind that the width of the twist is simply the base supporting the seat, think of it as the skeleton of the seat. Complicating the twist factor is that there are no standard sizes or measurements of any kind in the tree making industry.

Above the bars, and the twist in the bars, will be the ground seat. The ground seat is under the outer covering of the seat and is the body of what the rider will sit on. Ground seats are either custom made by hand or can be an integral part of the tree. Most fiberglass covered and molded trees will have the ground seat as an integral part of the tree. Note that the area between the bars is filled over at the time tree is made, and this forms the ground seat (photos #3 and #4). Now, looking at photo #2, a rawhide-covered tree, the space between the bars is open, and this will require that the saddle maker build the entire ground seat.

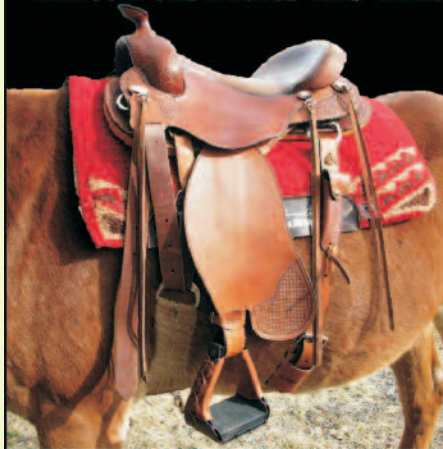
The ground seat in the molded and fiberglass covered trees are often ready to use and in many cases only require the final seat material to be laid on them, however, a saddle maker can add an additional ground seat if needed. If the saddle is made on a typical rawhide covered tree the ground seat will



Red line is the outer most part of the twist, while the blue line is usually where the twist is measured.

have to be built from the ground up, so to speak. The saddle maker has the option of making an all leather ground seat or a leather ground seat supported by a strainer. Photo #7 shows a tree with a metal seat strainer in place (some strainers are made of fiberglass). Layers of leather will be applied over this to form the ground seat. An all leather ground seat does away with the

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metal strainer. Which seat construction is better, will be debated by saddle makers for years to come. Photo #8 shows a ground seat under construction.

Ground seats are usually made from 3-5 layers of leather, depending on the desired

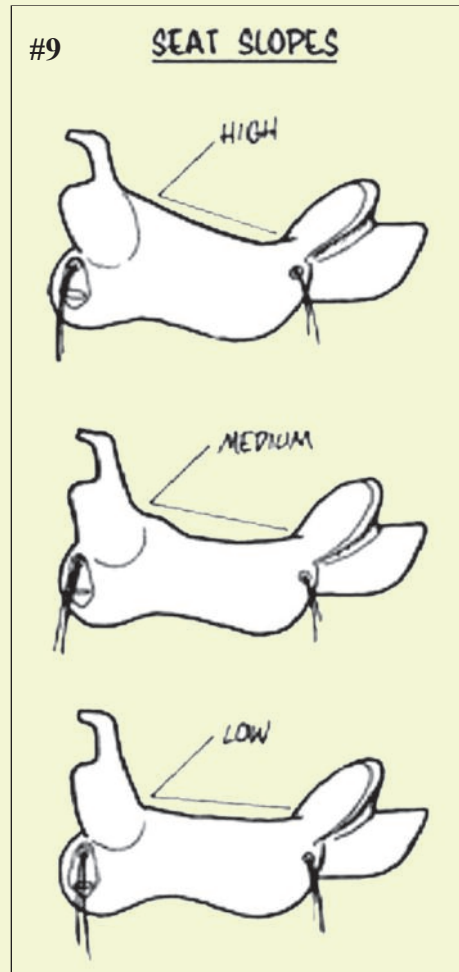


Metal seat strainer in place



Ground seat under construction

seat. The leather is glued in place and the saddle maker, using various hand tools, shapes the seat. It's at this stage that the real width and angles of the seat will be created.



Seat slope options

A truly custom saddle maker will pride himself on the ability to create a comfortable seat in his saddles. Among other things, the ground seat will determine the slope of the seat. The slope can be made low, high, or anything in between. Personal preference will be the determining factor in seat slope (photo #9 depicts seat slope). The making of the ground seat will determine the width, slope, and all final dimensions that will affect how the saddle will set when you ride it. Once the ground seat is shaped, it will have a final outer covering of leather shaped to it or it may have padding added along with the final covering

Continued...



Hard seat with one piece covering in a contrasting color.

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Overlay padded seat

Photo #10 shows a pretty typical hard seat saddle. The ground seat is covered with a single layer of leather, usually referred to as a one-piece seat. In this case the one-piece seat is shown in a contrasting color to the rest of the saddle. Photo #11 shows an inlaid

padded seat. This seat is inlaid as opposed to the padding being an overlay, stitched on top of a one-piece seat. Photo #12 shows a half padded seat installed like an inlaid seat. Photo #13 shows a full padded seat and #14 is an example of an overlay full padded seat.

There are variations on how a padded seat is installed but these photos are fairly representative of the padded seats available today.

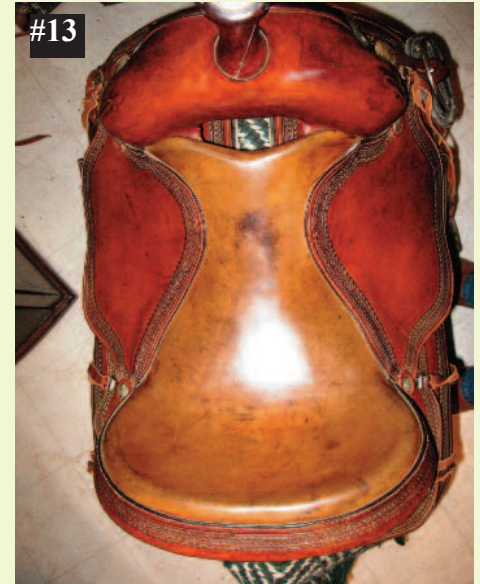
Next month in part two we'll cover seat measurement.



#11
Inlaid padded seat



#12
Half padded seat



#13
Full padded seat

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