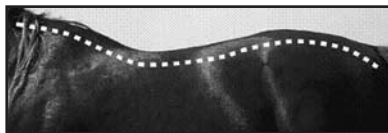


An increasingly popular alternative to the conventional English or Western saddle is the “treeless”.

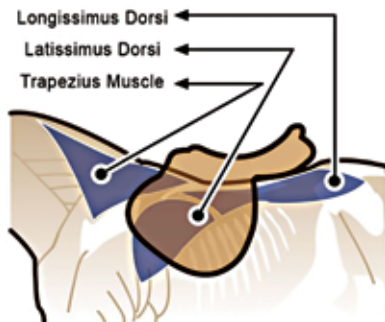
Every horse’s back is different. The back of the individual horse will change often during its lifetime, whether through age, training, disease or seasonal transitions. Whenever we ride, the horse’s back is constantly in motion. The dynamic and ongoing changes in posture while the horse moves under the rider are determined by the level of collection, flexion and gait.



Horse with head raised.

The horse that is ridden on the loose rein with high head carriage will hollow its back (the back will show a pronounced dip and will look somehow sunken). When the horse is ridden correctly on the bit or long and low, the angle of the back will change and the spine will lift. Any horse can lift its back in the saddle position about 5 cm depending on the engagement of different muscle groups and dorsal ligament.

A saddle with a tree, not being immediately flexible, cannot compensate for these constant changes in the horse’s topline. In contrast, the flexible treeless saddle easily adjusts itself, to keep the horse comfortable through these various changes.



The thoracic section of the horse’s vertebral column is not created naturally for carrying the weight of the rider. The aim of schooling must therefore be to build up the horse’s muscles so that it is able to carry our weight without injury. A horse only becomes a true riding horse when it has learned to curve its back. Through this curving of the thoracic segment of the vertebral column the individual vertebrae joints are opened and there is an improved flow of blood to the muscles enabling lateral

movement of the thoracic vertebrae. If this motion sequence is hindered by a saddle that sits wrongly and is rigid or by the rider sitting too far back in the saddle, the horse cannot move its back properly.

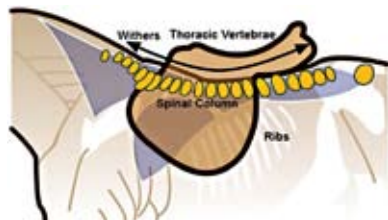
A treeless saddle positions the rider over the horse’s centre of gravity (thoracic vertebrae 9-13) and leaves the rear part of the spinal section free (lumbar vertebrae). This creates the optimum horse welfare conditions for riding. The pommel and cantle are made from rigid material (foam, fibreglass or plastic, depending on the manufacturer) embedded in the two pockets of the saddle and the rider is positioned in between them. The rigid parts are hardly affected by the weight of the rider and therefore retain the ability to follow the movement of the horse without any negative influence.



Horse with head lowered.

You can place the saddle onto the horse’s shoulder, since the scapula (shoulder blade) is able to move underneath the saddle and the muscles are not bruised. This type of saddle places the rider in the optimal position, above the center of gravity of the horse and therefore enables a young horse to balance itself more easily. Even underneath the rigid cantle, there’s sufficient space left – so no unnecessary weight of the rider is applied.

How does it work? The pommel of a treeless saddle is filled and stabilized with a rigid material. The Barefoot has a foam cantle, the Torsion has wood, and the Sensation has plastic; but there is no tree between your seat and your horse’s back. This allows an ultra-close contact so that you and your horse



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can move freely and naturally together. Most saddles come with the standard medium width pommel, but can be interchanged with wide or narrow pommels as an accessory. The anatomically cut cantle is constructed of thick, flexible foam, to avoid pressure points from the rider and therefore allow better movement and collection of the horse's back.

The pommel and cantle may have zippered openings so they can be replaced with soft cloth or material, if needed, to allow even more conformity to extremely hard-to-fit horses. Wider and narrower pommels are available in certain situations, but the standard pommel usually fits a wide variety of horses. Through these forms and through the positioning of the rider close to the horse, the saddle achieves a very secure hold on the horse's back and does not tend to slip on even the roundest horses.

Many treeless saddles include thick, soft foam panels to the right and left of the horse's spine for improved spinal clearance and better shock absorption. A wide variety of styles are available, through English, Western and All Purpose. Different brands use different leather gauges and finishes, but usually it is Nubuck, vegetable dyed and tanned.

Riders with back problems or other disabilities and can often ride without pain as the motion of the horse is transmitted in a soft, wavelike way which means much less stress and strain on the body.

Another bonus of the treeless saddle is the weight - for comparison the Barefoot Arizona weighs in 4.5kg/10 lbs.; the Sensation Western Sport Trail Model G4 is around 5kg/11 lbs depending on the choice of leather. Compare that to a regular Western pleasure saddle!

Treeless saddles do not usually require specialist fitting, however, one saddle does not always fit all. You will not cause any saddle pressure as long as you use an additional pressure-absorbing underlay. Which one depends on the rider's weight, time spent in the saddle and the horse's conformation.

A horse in training undergoes radical changes as the muscles develop, the back changes, fat dwindles. A traditional saddle with a tree is unlikely to fit throughout these changes, while a treeless saddle will "grow" with the horse.

Treeless saddles are suitable for training young horses, because they equally spread the weight of the rider in a totally different way than a saddle with a tree.

A treeless saddle is especially well suited for gaited horses: it allows their backs and shoulders the freedom to move that they may need in order to gait. Also, they are often short-backed, so conventional saddles will hurt them by banging the rear ends of the tree into their loins when they bend.

Limitations of a treeless saddle:

Riders who have not yet developed good balance may feel insecure because of the lack of the stiff tree aiding their posture.

Mounting from the ground is not recommended (but then neither is it recommended with any saddle, because of the strain it puts on the horse's spine). If you have to mount from the ground, don't hang on to the horn but grab the opposite side of the saddle and the mane instead, face forward, push up hard and fast with your right leg, and throw the weight in your upper body over to the other side right away. You may need a non-slip pad. A breastplate is often recommended if you plan to do a lot of hill work.

While treeless saddles are made in a variety of English and Western styles, most manufacturers recommend that they are not used for jumping over 3' (too much pressure on the stirrups), or for Western activities such as roping, (too much strain on the horn).

Riders over 92kg/200 lb who ride long hours may be better off with a conventional saddle. Shorter, occasional rides are not a problem, although a really good quality pad is recommended for heavier riders. With all treeless saddles, you should use a shock absorbing pad with foam or felt inserts. This distributes weight evenly over a larger area.

Not all treeless saddles are suited for horses with high withers: for 'A-frame' horses you should choose a model with good spine clearance and a higher pommel. The bareback-pad style of treeless saddle is only suitable for rounder, well-muscled horses. And don't forget to use a good, substantial pad under treeless saddles.

If you show, you may need to clear the use of a treeless saddle with your governing body or the judge. Western saddles look very different to the regular show saddle because of the lack of "bling".

Treeless saddles are intended to comfortably fit even the most difficult-to-fit horses, whether they have wither issues, are long-backed, short-backed, or have a wide barrel, or they change shape drastically from season to season. A treeless saddle can usually conform to practically all of them.