



Jonathan Chapman is the Chairman of the British Eventing Safety committee

FORM VERSUS FUNCTION



ASTRID HARRISON/ALAMY

Maybe it's my age, but am I alone in thinking that in our modern equestrian world form has become more important than function?

THIS OBSERVATION CAN be applied at several levels. The number of saddles I see on my clinics that literally do not fit the horse or the rider is increasing. They often look stunning, made of beautiful leather, impeccably cut and stitched, with some exotic-sounding name, but not fit for purpose!

The saddle is the interface between the rider's weight and the horse's back. Given that horses' backs were not designed to carry weight, it's pretty important that the saddle fits to ease the burden. I am fortunate to have had the services of a very good saddler for many years and in theory there are more trained saddle fitters about now than ever, so why is this occurring?

I think eBay has a lot to answer for. Thousands of saddles available relatively

cheaply, and riders are by passing the trained saddler to save money. But they fail to realise that a 17.5" medium will not fit every horse. If only saddle fitting was that simple.

Now my vain side would love to say I ride in a 17.5" saddle, but the fact is I have long have long legs and a large back side, and I require an 18 to 18.5" saddle. This in consequence limits what horse I can ride, a fact I have to accept. And a good saddler would tell me so, but it seems that many don't pass on this sort of honest comment.

I don't believe you can tell whether a saddle truly fits unless you ride in it or see the purchaser ride in it. When you watch someone ride in a saddle you need to know what you are looking at. The saddle needs to sit level, laterally and longitudinally, so that the horse's

movement and comfort are not compromised, and so that the rider can maintain self-carriage. Without self-carriage the rider cannot apply the aids accurately and training a horse becomes more difficult.

Saddle fitters are not trained equestrian Coaches. Some are scrupulous in their advice, and some less so. So I would advise that if you are trying a new saddle, make sure your regular Coach is present to pass comment and perhaps even ride in it. It is not an insubstantial purchase. It is worth paying a bit extra to have your Coach there to help you make the right choice.

While on the subject of saddles, two other points are worth highlighting. Check the flocking on your saddle regularly. Horses change shape with age and season and flocking compresses and shifts. It needs checking at least annually and makes the difference between a happy, forward-thinking horse and a grumpy, backward-thinking horse. If a saddle needs completely re-flocking it may need to be taken away to be done, but normal 'tweaking' of the flocking should be carried out at the yard with the horse present to check the fit.

I am often asked by parents what sort of saddle they should buy for their child's horse or pony. If they are going Eventing and can only afford one saddle, they should spend the money on a really good jump saddle. Do not buy one cheap dressage and one cheap jump saddle and never buy a general purpose saddle. They are a 'jack of all trade' and master of none. You can do a perfectly good dressage test in a jump saddle but not vice versa, and since our sport is two-thirds jumping it's an obvious choice.

My last plea to all riders is to remember that whatever the discipline, the horse should be the star of the show. The horse should catch your eye and hold your attention, not the diamond-encrusted bridle, stirrups or multi-coloured saddle. We as riders are there to demonstrate how well we have trained our horses. We are the supporting cast only. Dress smartly but not loudly, complement them by what you wear and the tack you use, but let the horse do the talking. 🐾