

# SADDLE FIT AND SADDLE SKIRTS

## PART 1

By Terry Wagner

I have written a number of articles on saddles and saddle fit. We have discussed in detail stirrups, saddle horns, seats, saddletrees and other parts of saddles. However, we have not discussed the skirts, as we know it on today's western saddles, and how skirts can affect saddle fit. I think most people take the skirts on western saddles for granted. How skirts affect saddle fit has occupied a large part of my time now for several years.

So we are all on the same page, photo #1 shows a saddle with the skirts, and jockeys noted for reference. The jockeys will play a large part of this article as well as, of course, the skirts. Some of the most common skirt designs today are round, square, butterfly and whatever custom design a maker wants to assign to them. Skirts have been on saddles for decades and on saddles from all over world in one fashion or another. However, not all saddles have skirts. English saddles don't have them, Australian saddles don't have them, McClellan army saddles didn't have them, and saddles made all over Europe are made without skirts. In the interest of clarity we will note here that English saddles have skirts that correspond to what is called seat jockeys on a western saddle. My question then was why do we need skirts on western saddles and how do they affect saddle fit?

There are a number of saddles made in the U.S. that have small skirts. I know of a couple of "western" saddles that have leather covering the tree bars and nothing else. However, the eye appeal of these saddles, from my standpoint, is less than pleasing. When I look under a saddle I like to see fleece looking back at me, either good quality artificial fleece or the stuff off the sheep's back. Fleece on the bottom of western saddles has been traditional for 150 years or so. Fleece is what lines the



skirts and lays against your saddle pad or blankets and some folks say prevents saddle pads from slipping out from under a saddle. I question this thinking to some degree.

One thing that I have learned is that if you fit a saddle to a mule, and you may have a near perfect fit, failure to double check the fit with a saddle pad will often times result in a finished saddle that doesn't fit. For that reason we always double check saddle fit with a pad or blanket at least one half inch or more thick. The issue is that when a bare tree fits a bare mule's back just right, the finished saddle will have a half inch or more of leather and fleece attached to the bottom of the tree bars, and this will narrow the fit. Often times saddles made with trees that were not double checked for fit with a pad or blanket the finished saddle will "bridge" on the horse when saddled. A half-inch pad, used in the fitting process, will pretty much duplicate the fit of a finished saddle without a pad. Add a three-quarter inch thick pad and you start to duplicate the fit of a finished saddle on a thin pad. This concept is finally starting to be noted by several saddle fit gurus who are inclined to video their discoveries and post them on

Youtube. This is something we have done in our saddle fitting now for a number of years.

Saddle skirts have not always been constructed as they are today. Originally saddle skirts were a single layer of leather with fleece sewn to the bottom side (photo #2) Somewhere along the path to the 21st century we added leather to them and shortened them pretty drastically. The great New Zealand saddle maker Fred Harsant lived in the U.S. for twenty years and did exhaustive research on western saddles. In his long out of print book *History Of The American Stock Saddle*, Fred maintained that a number of changes to the stock saddle as we know it today came about as a result of the demands of the timed event rodeo cowboys.

Fred maintained that the demand for faster times, in the timed events, resulted in the lowering of the cantle, rais-



ing the seat, and shortening the skirts. Along with the shorter skirts came a construction method called “plugging the skirts”. In this, a second layer of leather is added around the outside, top edge of the skirts, that extends from the outer edge to the edge of the tree bars, on all but the area directly under the riders legs. This adds rigidity to the edge of the skirts to, among other things, keep the edge of the skirts from curling as it ages (photo #2 again). If not made properly these stiff skirts can wreak havoc with saddle fit.

When a set of skirts is properly installed they should be wet “blocked” to the shape of the bars and the outer edge of the skirts hammered back away from the edge of the bars. This prevents the skirts from bearing any part of the rider’s weight. The weight of the rider should only be supported by the tree bars. The skirts improperly supporting weight can be most often found at the back and front of the tree bars. Many times this will result in rubbing of the mule’s hair and eventually soreness of the mules back. If a saddle maker does not block the skirts to the tree bar this will result in less than optimal saddle fit. This will add to a rock and roll problem with the saddle on the mule. So what happens when we just simply remove the skirts?

To test this we made a saddle with only bare bars against the horse, then a second identical saddle with a thin covering of leather cemented to the bars. After some research we found a couple of companies offering saddles for sale with this very type of construction. What we found was a saddle with exceptional fit and stability. We did not experience any slippage of our saddle pads when ridden. However, a saddle still has to have seat and cantle jockeys. The seat jockeys are made to go around the bottom of the front swells or fork and extend in front of the fork of the saddle in order to cover the tree bars on each side. The cantle jockey covers the top of the tree bars behind the cantle. The total lack of any covering on the bars of the saddle resulted in the edge

of the jockeys jamming down into the bar back at fitting, or the saddle pad, no matter what type of pad or blanket. They would push so hard at times that you could push your hand under them only with great effort. This we considered a big problem. First off it pushed the jockeys out of shape, and secondly it just simply didn’t look cowboy cool.

Also, as many may have experienced, even with saddles that fit well, you can have “rock and roll” issues fitting certain kinds of mules. We all but eliminated any rock and roll in the fit of the saddles to the mules we worked with, including some very hard to fit mules. Also, we eliminated a bunch of weight in the saddle. Using the tree from our Montosa Saddles, which normally weigh about 27-28 pounds, depending on seat size, we dropped down to almost 21 pounds ready to ride with stirrups, latigos and a mohair front cinch and no horn. So what was not to like? Great fit and less weight! Sounded good to all who saw the saddle. What the issue was as far as I was concerned was the overall look of things. I wanted to see fleece on the bottom of the saddle and I think most people do.

To make a quick conversion I cut some natural real shearling to fit the bars on one of the saddles I had on hand and simply glued the shearling to the

bottom of the bars with industrial grade contact cement. Low and behold it worked just great. I have been riding the saddle now for almost two years with no issues. Great fit and very stable on my mules, Buggs and Jones. I have purposely ridden without a britchen, crupper or breast collar with great success. However, trying to convince someone to ride with the fleece glued to the saddle bars is not something I particularly want to attempt. So, one more step was needed; skirts, but greatly reduced skirts.

I took one of the saddles we had made up and took it down to the fiberglass covered bars. I cut a set of skirts out of ten-ounce leather. I cut them to fit the bars with no extra material. I blocked them to the bars, and added a quality faux fleece lining that is 90% real shearling and 10% polyester on an artificial backing. I attached the “skirts” using bleed strings, nails and screws. Pretty much like a lot of skirts are attached. The result is a lightweight saddle with a great fit. We rode it for several months and decided it was time to put one out to the public.

About the time we had made this decision I got a call from a lady in Reno, Nevada, who was looking for a lightweight, hornless saddle for her horse, black in color. She asked how much the

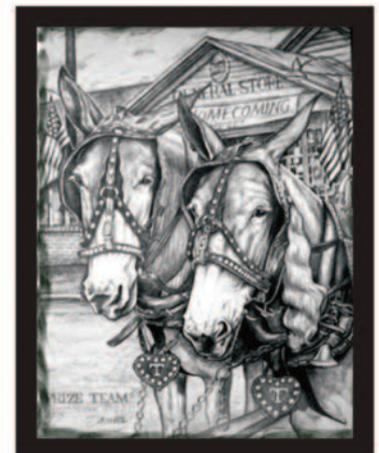
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saddle would weigh with a 14-inch seat. I told her I had no idea, but if she was willing to take a leap of faith I would try my best to get her what she was looking for and if she didn't like it she didn't have to keep it. The result is shown in photo #3. The finished weight with stirrups and latigos was eighteen pounds and the fit to size skirts are covered in black fleece. The saddle was shipped to Reno, Nevada, with the understanding that every month for the first six months



I wanted an email report about what was good, bad or indifferent, no holds barred. I admit I did this with my fingers crossed. The result? Nothing but praise for everything about the saddle from all angles. Whew!!

Could we repeat this, that was the question. We recently listed one of the mini skirt saddles for sale on our Facebook page. Photo #4 illustrates the mini skirts. Basically the same saddle as the black one, but a different color (photo



#5) in a mule bar fit. It sold the first week and the lady's positive comments can be found on our Facebook page. I realize we are not the first to pursue this idea. So where do we go with all of this?

Su Amigo, Terry

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