Rider and horse are a team connected by the saddle. Both horse and rider need as much unrestricted movement as possible. Therefore, the saddle must fit them both. Neither horse nor rider should be forced into unnatural and uncomfortable positions.

By following the steps in this guide, you will be able to efficiently and logically select saddles that are compatible with your bone structure. Then with some insight into saddle fitting to your horse, (see our Fitting Guide: Saddle to Horse) your team will be happily connected and able to work together.
STEP 1
(pelvic width)
First, to accurately measure your pelvic width, use a piece of corrugated cardboard and a piece of chalk. (This works best with lean, fit riders.)
1. Place a piece of double walled corrugated cardboard on a hard surface. Something like a picnic table bench is perfect.
2. Sit on it. Do not move around, but lift your knees, one at a time to allow your seat bones to press into the cardboard.
3. Stand.
4. Using a piece of chalk on its side, rub it back and forth across the cardboard.
5. Two round areas that were dented by your seat bones will be unmarked, or faintly marked.
6. Measure the distance between the centers of these round areas. This is your pelvic width.

STEP 2
(Sweet Spot)
When a saddle is properly balanced, neither tipping you forward nor throwing you backwards, it is correctly balanced. Once it is balanced, you can determine the location and length of the sweet spot. Use a cylindrical object (a Bic pen works fine) and place it on the forward ramp and allow it to roll down to the lowest part of the seat. Mark this place with a piece of tape. Do the same by placing the pen on the ramp leading to the cantle and mark this spot with a second piece of tape. Measure the seat width at the back edge of the sweet spot. For correct fit the measurement between your seat bones should be slightly less than the measurement of the seat at this point. You want your seat bones supported, but just barely. If the seat is too wide, you will be forced into a “chair seat”.

STEP 3
(Hip Structure)
This will determine the best sweet spot location for YOU. While standing sideways in front of a full length mirror, imagine your femur running from knee to hip. With your hand on your thigh, feel your femur and follow it to the top. Lean riders will find it easy to feel the movement of the hip joint as they lift their knee to a “stork” position. Those of us with more upholstery, not so much. Raise and lower the knee until you feel the joint. Hold a finger here and evaluate this spot relative to the entire torso depth at this point. Is it centered? Is it placed more rearward? By knowing your own pelvic structure, you will be able to select a saddle with a sweet spot that is compatible with your personal pelvic structure.

STEP 4
(research & prepare)
Before visiting a tack shop do some research. Search online to find saddles with certain features such as steel and wood trees that can be modified to fit your horse, wool flock stuffed panels that offer further saddle fit options, different girthering systems, Velcro attached leg support, etc. Call tack shops in your area to determine if they have or can order assorted saddles of your size and ask if you should make an appointment. (Not all tack shops have a saddle specialist on staff every day.) Bring the following items with you when you visit the tack shop: Notebook and pen, your stirrups buckled at your correct length, camera and assorted padding items such as small towels, bits of fleece, thick felt, etc. It’s best to use materials that will not compress under your weight. And wear your riding breeches and boots when you visit your local tack shop.
STEP 5
(At the tack shop)

1. Select a saddle of appropriate size. Do you have four fingers both in front of you and behind your butt? If not, select a larger or smaller size. Select a saddle with seat width that you think is correct. (see step 1) Attach your stirrups and place saddle on the saddle buck (fake horse). Balance the saddle by using some of your padding items. (stirrups should be crossed over the withers and out of the way) Mount and dismount as necessary re-adjusting the padding as necessary so that you feel comfortably balanced neither pitched forward nor tipped backward. Lift your knees up toward the pommel and allow your butt to slide to the “sweet spot”. DO NOT PUSH YOURSELF BACK IN THE SEAT. Do you still feel balanced? If not, then dismount, re-adjust and remount.

2. Once you are balanced, carefully dismount without disturbing the saddle or any corrective padding. Notice how high the cantle is relative to the pommel. Take a photo. If you decide to demo this saddle, you will need to duplicate this balance for your demo ride. You will find that you are more comfortable in a saddle where the seat’s “working center” matches the position of your hip joints. (See photo previous page.)

3. Remount and allow your legs to drop naturally (no stirrups). Do you feel laterally and longitudinally balanced and supported? Can you drop your legs down and around your “horse”? Are your knees resting softly against the flaps and pointing forward? Are your toes pointing naturally forward? (If not, the seat may be too wide and you should try a different saddle with a narrower seat.)

4. Put your feet into your stirrups. Check ear-hip-heel alignment by looking in a mirror or have a friend take a photo of you. Your legs should drop naturally down and around the “horse” and you should have good ear-hip-heel alignment? If so, this saddle might be a “keeper”. Have someone take a photo of you mounted on it and then another shot of the saddle alone.

5. Evaluate the flaps. Look for the Goldilocks zone….Not too big and not too small. Do your knees extend beyond the flap? Is the leg support positioned to give you support without restriction? Leg support should never force your leg into an unnatural position.

Repeat these steps with other saddles of interest. Hopefully you will have 2 or 3 finalists. Now it is time to try these on your horse. Everything will feel totally different. Your horse will be shaped differently and the element of motion is added. Do you know an independent saddle fitter (one who is not trying to sell you a saddle)? Do have a riding instructor? Do you have a knowledgeable friend? It’s time to get them involved. Make an appointment to meet with them at the barn and bring your “finalists”.

Continue to STEP 6... The Demo Ride.
WHY YOU SHOULD NEVER RIDE A TOO SMALL SADDLE

I have had plus sized riders say to me “I know this saddle is too small for me. I plan to lose weight. But in the meantime, I want my horse to be comfortable. I don’t mind being uncomfortable…I just want what is best for my horse.”

PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE don’t do this. Your poor horse is suffering.

This is why:
• Your weight is placed behind the working center. Indeed, sometimes your butt bulges over the back of the cantle.
• The pommel lifts as the cantle drops under your weight. This will usually force you into a “chair seat” making riding difficult.
• Then, with each downbeat of the trot, your weight pushes the saddle forward slightly – perhaps .005” (the width of a human hair). After only 400 downbeats the saddle will moves forward about 2”.
• Your weight bangs down on only a few square inches of surface area.

How many of us limit our ride to a few times around the arena? The ride will be painful to both you and your horse. Bucking or other undesirable behavior may result.

Perfect fit for both horse and rider is essential, especially if you’re plus sized. If you really want what is best for your horse, you will ride in a saddle that fits both of you and ride as well as you can. Regular lessons are a must.

STEP 6 (demo ride)

If you are considering more than one saddle, repeat with the second saddle, taking care to balance each saddle correctly.

Since muscle memory is short, you should ride 2 saddles back-to-back. When riding the second round, compare the “winner” of first round to the third saddle. Repeat the process with each saddle. DO NOT RE-RIDE THE LOSERS. Compare only two saddles at a time. At the end of the day, you will have one winner and will have made a good decision.

You will want to have your selected saddle custom fitted to your horse. Then you must continuously evaluate fit to the horse. Horses, like people, change shape throughout their lives depending on age, diet, level of fitness, and general health. A good saddle with a sturdy tree can be re-fitted many times without weakening the tree. And good quality wool flocking can be re-adjusted or re-stuffed whenever necessary.

Set up a time to meet at the barn with your instructor, an independent saddle fitter, and a knowledgeable friend who can take notes and photos. Bring the demo saddles, your notebook with your notes from the tack shop, assorted padding items and a camera or cell phone.

First, have the saddle fitter evaluate the fit of each saddle to the horse. Since these demo saddles have not been custom fitted, your fitter will need to evaluate tree width and length, channel width and panel construction. Sometimes, a demo saddle should not be girthed on.

1. Correctly place saddle on horse’s back leaving plenty of room for the shoulders to rotate and bulge without being pinched. Use your padding items as necessary to get the same cantle/pommel difference as you had in the tack shop. Refer to your notes for a starting point.

2. Girth up and mount. Re-evaluate. It may be necessary to add/remove padding several times before perfect balance is achieved. If you don’t take the time to do this, you will get a poor ride...all because the saddle wasn’t balanced. Lack of balance can turn a winner into a loser. (Once the saddle is custom fitted to your horse extra padding will not be necessary.)

3. Ride. Have your instructor and friends evaluate your riding and even take some photos and/or videos. They can notice things about your riding that you, cannot. Other things only you can feel. No one can get inside your body and feel what you feel. Dictate your observations to a note-taking friend and always remember that you are buying a saddle for yourself...not your instructor or friend.