Saddles

When you select a saddle for an Icelandic horse, you have a wide choice, but there is a great difference in design, flexibility, technical features and quality. So it is useful (and perhaps even necessary) to know about the main features of a saddle and the most common varieties that are on offer.

Saddle tree (the core of the saddle) - flexibility and function

The same law is valid for saddles and for horses: A horse can be very well built, but if he does not have flexibility and if he is not soft, there will not be any great results. It is the saddle tree that affects the suppleness and the softness of the saddle. These are the most common variations:

- **Plastic tree**

Trees that are made of plastic are usually open in the middle. They are reinforced with steel springs to maintain their form. The flexibility and durability varies with the different manufacturers but the best trees are very supple and thus they spread the pressure/weight better over the horse's back than other trees. They also adapt better to different types of backs in horses.

- **Wooden tree**

These trees are made up of many layers of wood and are reinforced with steel springs to maintain the form. In general, the flexibility is less than it is in plastic trees, so these trees adapt less well to the movements of the horse and the different back types. If the horse's back bends, these trees tend to form a bridge-like effect that causes more pressure on the front and back parts of the saddle and less in the middle.

- **No tree**

Saddles or pads without a tree give the rider a great connection with the horse and they adapt very well to the horse's back. There is hardly any weight distribution, so there will be pressure areas under the rider's seat bone. In general, such saddles are not very good for regular riding tours and long trips.

Equilibrium and distribution of the weight

Saddles are supposed to increase the rider's equilibrium and to spread his weight over the horse's back. It is often said, that balance is the key to good results in riding. Mostly, these are the two factors that help to achieve this:

- **The saddle tree**

The tree should be designed in such a way that it puts the rider close to the middle of the saddle, so the weight can be better spread. The form and location of the seat and the knee rolls should increase the balance of the rider.

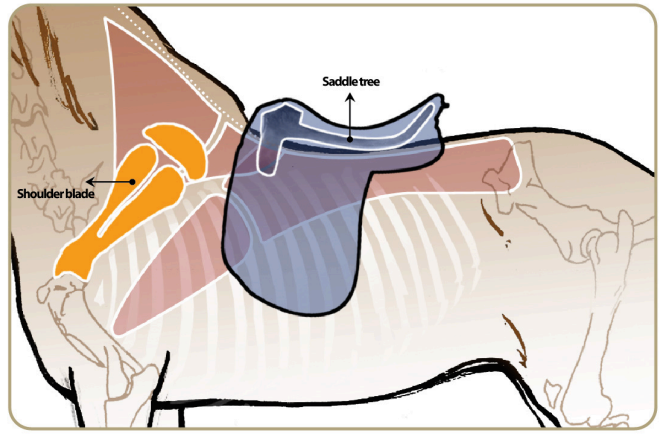
- **Panels**

There are two main types of panels:

1. Panels that are made in a mould from a mixture of different materials. The characteristics and the quality of these materials vary according to how the producers mix the materials, but the best materials give a lot of softness, maintain their form well and spread the weight well. Generally, such panels give a close contact to the horse, they adapt well to different horse types and they do not need to be maintained by adding extra material or fixing their form. So it is not possible to adapt such a pad to only one horse.
2. Panels made of wool or materials like wool. This traditional filling for a panel becomes compressed after a lot of use, and it does adapt to the horse's back, that is: if the saddle is used for only one horse. It is possible to add or remove material from these panels to make them suit one particular horse, and they can be fixed if they get too compressed. If they are maintained well, they can keep their softness and spread the pressure well.

It is very important that there always is good space between the two panels; it should be possible to put three fingers in between. It is equally important that a panel fits the horse's back, and that the saddle is put correctly on the horse. Also, a saddle should not be too narrow or too wide for the horse.

This is how the saddle should be placed.



Keep Your Saddle in Good Repair

TEXT AND PHOTOS: Guðrún Hulda Pálsdóttir

My saddle is starting to show signs of wear and tear, after having been used regularly for 11 years. It is sloping forward and down on the horse's back, and after a riding tour it has moved forward, in front of the withers, which has a bad influence on my seat, and as a consequence on the movements of the horse. However, I do like the seat of this saddle, so I do not want to buy a new one. Instead, I visit the saddler Jón Sigurðsson in Garðabær, in search of advice. He has decades of experience in repairing saddles and tack. He handles my saddle softly, pinching, stuffing, gluing, sawing, burning and even massaging it a whole lot.

Jón söðli, as people often call him, says there are three types of repairs that people want him to make on their saddles that are most common: the stitches have come undone, the girth billets or stirrup bars are damaged, or the panels need to be restuffed. The saddle I put on Jón's repair table has half-empty panels and slopes forward, running towards the horse's shoulders, which could restrict him in his movements.

Jón shows me how you can check the pressure points on the panels. If you look at where the panel has become dirty where it touches the horse, you can see whether it lies equally and correctly on the horse, or whether it is crooked or whether there is an unusual amount of pressure or too little pressure, in some locations. If it is easy to see that the panel is not equally dirty everywhere, it can be time to bring your saddle to a saddler for some minor repairs.

Jón says that this is a common problem that can show up with normal use of a saddle. The panel can start to lie crookedly on a horse because the pressure is not equal. If the material in the panel is compressed a lot, the tree can start to touch the horse at the rear end, or the saddle can start running forward to the shoulders.

Reparation of such unequal pressure is done by taking the panels from under the saddle tree and filling them up again. Jón says that it varies a lot, how much work such a repair requires, because there are so many different types of saddles. In some saddles, reaching the panels is more difficult than in others, and there can be all kinds of different material in the stuffing. However, saddles with screwed panels are easier to repair than saddles with sewn panels, because of the work of removing the sewing and then sewing the panel to the tree again.

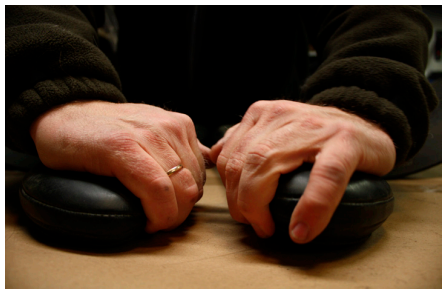
So it is rather lucky that I have a saddle with panels that are screwed on, and that they are filled with excellent Polish wool. In no time at all, Jón removes the panels from the tree and then stuffs light Icelandic wool into them. After having stuffed the panels, Jón softly crushes and massages them. He says that the assessment whether the panels are stuffed equally or not, is completely a matter of feeling. With all these years of experience in his hands, I trust Jón completely to assess this correctly. Apart from stuffing the panels, Jón also finds some damaged stitches which he replaces by hand, with a very thick leather thread, and he burns the ends, securing a safe finish. My improved saddle looks good, quite a bit thicker now, and all the openings and the loose stitches have disappeared. The cost of such a repair can be anywhere from 5.000 up to 15.000 ISK, according to Jón.

So now the only thing left is to try the saddle.

At first, it seems that the saddle is the same, as it lies on the horse's back, but after one hour of bends, gallop and circles, I notice a great difference in how the saddle lies. I no longer sit in front of the withers after my exercises. Instead, the seat is firm on the horse's back. So I can start to concentrate on things other than the location of my saddle, thanks to a deft saddler.

Loosening the panel.

Adding material.



Pushing the material to the correct location.

Burning to close the panel.