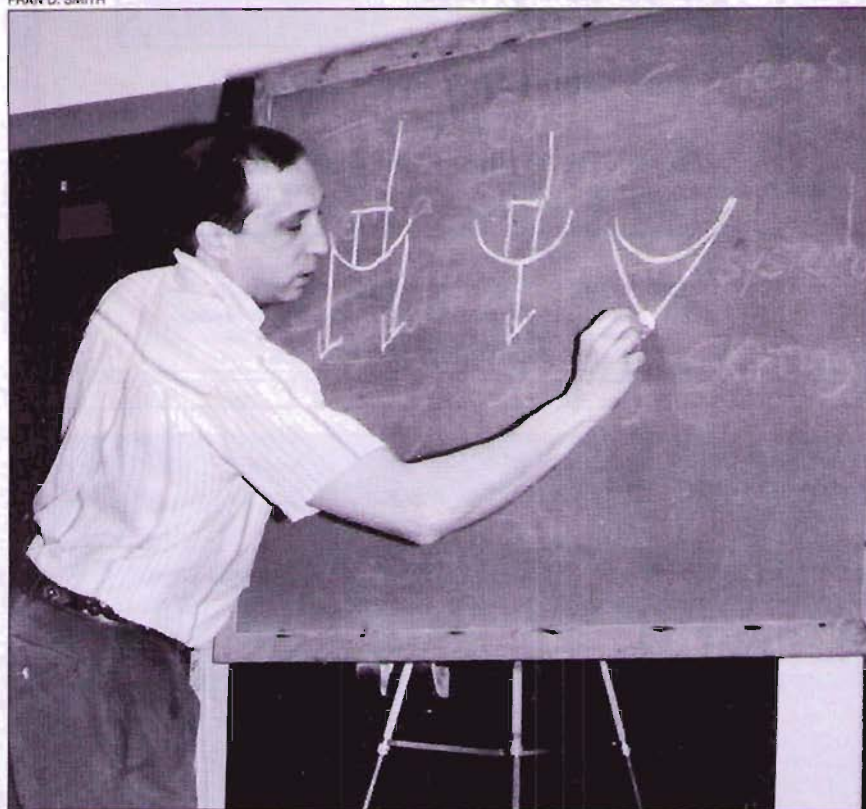


Dave Genadek

Buying a Used Saddle

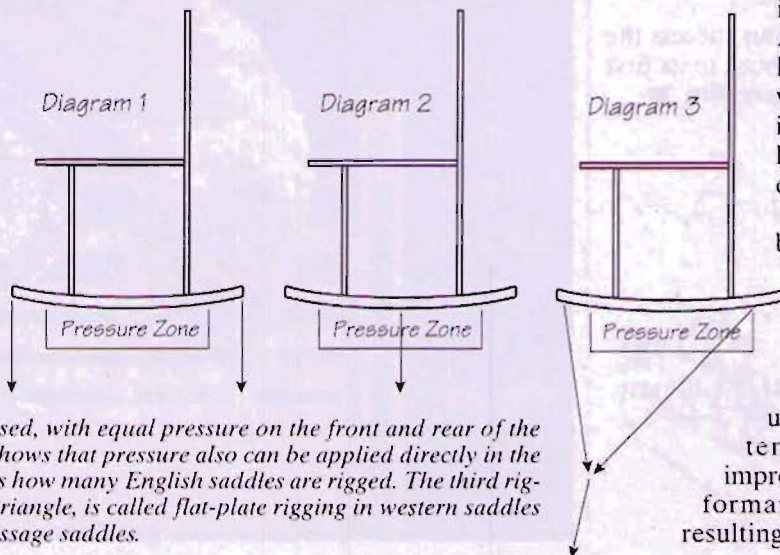
— By Fran Devereux Smith —

FRAN D. SMITH



Saddlemaker Dave Genadek used the blackboard to further explain rigging systems in saddles during one of his presentations at the Midwest Horse Fair in Madison, Wisconsin.

In these illustrations, Dave uses his rocking saddle-chair to show how the three rigging systems create basically the same zone of pressure on a horse's back. The first shows how many western saddles are designed to be used, with equal pressure on the front and rear of the rocker. Drawing number 2 shows that pressure also can be applied directly in the middle of the rocker, which is how many English saddles are rigged. The third rigging system, which forms a triangle, is called flat-plate rigging in western saddles and is also used in many dressage saddles.



DAVE Genadek is a master saddlemaker who achieved this status by apprenticing with various saddlemakers across the United States for about 10 years. Although Dave's skill in carving and dyeing leather has resulted in both national and international awards, he focuses primarily on how saddle construction relates to equine anatomy and the principles of good horsemanship, thus affecting the performance of horse and rider.

In fact, the saddlemaker works closely with Dr. Deb Bennett, whose field of expertise is conformation, and with clinician and trainer Peggy Cummings.

At the Midwest Horse Fair, held this past spring in Madison, Wis., Dave was a featured speaker. Purchasing a used saddle was among the topics he discussed. "Before you can buy a used saddle," he said, "you must understand what's important

in buying any saddle." And then he warned his audience, "The way I look at saddles is a little different. I look at them in terms of systems.

"There are three basic systems within a saddle that we need to understand: the rigging, the seating, and the skirting systems." By understanding the systems, a horseman can improve both his own performance and his horse's, resulting in more comfort for

both. "In buying a used saddle," Dave added, "look at each system and identify what condition it is in. That's the easy part. The harder part is understanding the systems."

The Rigging System

This system refers to the saddletree and how it is secured to the horse—with either two cinches or one cinch, and where they are attached.

"Think of your saddle as a rocking chair, where the chair doesn't rock, but the floor does," he explained, using a miniature rocking chair to demonstrate. "We are trying to find a rigging system that secures the 'saddle-chair' to the horse in such a way that the pressure is in the middle part of the rocker," Dave said.

"There are three ways we can do that. For example, on our rocking chair, we can put equal pressure on the front (cinch) and on the rear (cinch). We can put pressure directly in the middle, or we can form a triangle (with the rigging), and the pressure ends up in the middle when you pull on the apex." (See three diagrams.)

Using two cinches keeps the pressure in the middle of the saddle, if the back cinch is snugged up properly. "But if your back cinch is too loose, this is what happens," the saddlemaker demonstrated, tipping the saddle forward. "The rear half begins to bounce up and down and slide from side to side. Now the saddle pulls on the girth, which can result in galls and cinch sores."

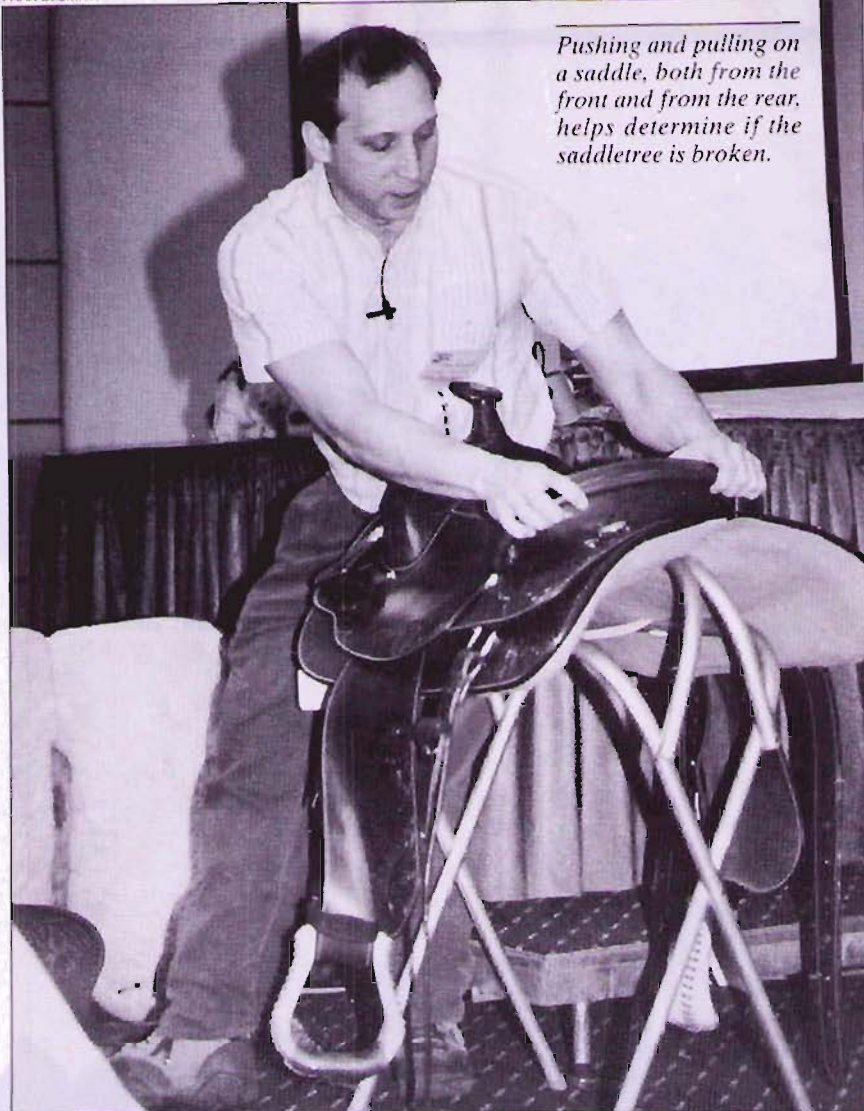
The single-cinch rigging system also applies pressure to the center of the saddle. "This system," said Dave, "is usually used on English saddles."

"Another method is a flat-plate rigging used on some western saddles," he continued, describing the triangular rigging system that also properly distributes the pressure. "If it is properly designed, you can get by without using a rear cinch, but it is more effective if you do."

"The rigging system should hold a saddle still, with virtually no movement. This is a passive system that shouldn't be doing anything. Generally, when you're looking for a saddle that's working the way it's supposed to, it's doing nothing. If the saddle's doing something, something doesn't fit."

"The main idea: Look for a rigging system that puts the pressure on the center part of the body. That is a functional rigging system whether it is on a new saddle or a used saddle."

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Pushing and pulling on a saddle, both from the front and from the rear, helps determine if the saddletree is broken.

"Then," continued Dave, "examine that system. When I say rigging, I am including the tree because the tree is as necessary to the overall system as is the rigging. The first thing: Make sure the rocking chair isn't broken. So, grab the saddle and pull on it." The saddlemaker demonstrated by standing at the rear of the saddle, with it braced against his stomach, and tugging fairly hard on the front of the saddle. "Pull on the horn, too, and make sure it doesn't have any movement. Then come around to the front and do the same thing."

"Trees in this kind of a saddle system, which is a rigid-form system, aren't flexible. If they do flex, they don't work; they are broken. There are four pieces of wood in a tree that are glued and screwed together, and then they are covered."

"There are three basic kinds of trees being used in saddles today—plastic, fiberglass-covered wood tree, and rawhide-covered wood tree," continued Dave.

The plastic trees have what Dave termed "a major design flaw," which can encumber the horse's movement. "The plastic trees are fine if you're planning to ride only once or twice a year. You have to balance what you will be doing with how much money you have and what you can afford to do. From the technical standpoint, it probably isn't going to work on the horse. Personally, I'm always thinking about the horse first, so from that standpoint, I'd stay away from the plastic trees."

According to Dave, a horse's stomach muscles contract and allow him to lift his back and carry weight. This is important when training a horse to work off his hindquarters. A saddle should shift weight to the muscles alongside the spine, bridging it without restricting its movement. The saddlemaker compared the movement of the spine to a "river of energy that wiggles and wobbles, which creates movement in the horse. We don't want anything sitting on the spine."

which the saddle bridges over." It was Dave's opinion that, due to their construction, "plastic trees interrupt the flow of that river," but he added that plastic trees are less expensive than other types.

When he first used a fiberglass-covered tree, the saddlemaker admitted that he cringed at the departure from traditional rawhide. "But now that I've become rational about the tree and worked with it, I cannot find any reason not to use one. Fiberglass trees are extremely strong and are less expensive than rawhide-covered trees. Overall," he continued, "I like the traditional rawhide-covered wood tree, even though it is a little heavier.

"When you look at a rigging system," he continued, "lift the seat jockeys and check the general condition of the leather. Think about leather just as you would your own skin. You don't want it too dry or too oily. If it's too oily, the oil sifts into the leather, suffocates the fibers, and collects dirt. Some people think more oil is better; that isn't the case. And," he added, "check the rigging for cracks. A lot of cracks tells you that the leather has been too dry and may be rotten."

Dave cautioned against the use of a lacquer finish on saddle leather. "These saddles look really good on the shelf, but after a week or so, you get spots because the lacquer is wearing off. I don't like a lacquer finish on any saddle because it seals the pores, and oil will not go through the lacquer. You won't be able to nourish the fibers in your leather." In addition, he said that lacquer is sometimes used as a "level" coat on scarred leather, to give it a better appearance.

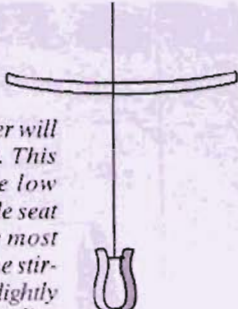
The saddlemaker also recommended checking any stitching, to ensure that it is sound, and to check especially closely around rivets in the rigging since a rivet can rust and corrode the leather around it. For hardware, he prefers dees made of stainless steel.

The Seating System

"The next system is the seating system—the system that lets you be where you want to be on a horse. The way I said that is important: The system lets you be where you want to be. In other words, you need to be able to put your body where you want it; the seat should not be putting you somewhere else. You should act on the saddle; the saddle should not be acting on you.

"For that to happen, you must be in a basic, balanced position. Through-

The low point of the saddle seat and the position of the stirrup determine if the rider will be well-balanced. This shows where the low point of the saddle seat should be for the most balanced ride. The stirrup should hang slightly forward of a center line bisecting the low point, to provide for proper alignment of the rider's heel, hip, and shoulder.



In some saddles, the low point of the seat is too far back, toward the cantle, which throws the rider back and out of balance with his mount.

out history there have been two positions that people have ridden in," he continued, describing one as the position used for jousting, in which the rider's legs are pushed forward to help brace him against the cantle. "That is not a good way to ride. It's hard on the horse, and it isn't good for you either," he added.

"The other position is where you want to be—with your heel, your hip, and your shoulder in a line. This style of riding originated with men throwing spears. To allow you to be balanced enough to do that, the low point of the saddle seat should be in the middle of it." Dave added that this held true in regard to many saddles ridden by cowboys about a century ago, although they were throwing a rope rather than a spear.

Dave then displayed a saddle with a bad seating system, pointing out that the low point of the seat was farther back than it should be. That, according to the saddlemaker, sets a horseman farther back in the saddle than is ideal for balanced riding. "When you buy a used saddle, watch for that because it will put you in a bad position.

"Now we need to find a place to put our foot. Remember the straight line, that center point where we draw a line down through the shoulders, hip, and heel? We want our stirrup to be hanging between the ball of the foot and the heel in front of that line."

The saddlemaker again held up two saddles for comparison. In the more correctly made saddle, the low point of the seat was positioned with the stirrup hanging right in front, which makes for balanced riding. The other

is with full leathers, and the other is with half-leathers.

"With full leathers the stirrup leather goes up and around the bar and forms a continuous loop, with the stirrup hung in the loop. This is, by far and away, the safest method," Dave said. Because the fender overlays a full loop of leather, which provides added strength, the additional bulk makes it harder to turn the fender to hang correctly. (See diagrams.)

"The other method is with half-leathers, where the leather is cut off (and attached to the top of the fender). The fender, itself, now becomes the weight-bearing object. With this construction, the fender wears out sooner. The joint or seam here (where the fender joins the stirrup leather) becomes an area of great stress that you want to watch for wear," said the saddlemaker, who added that the seam stitching should also be checked where the fender and half-leather are fastened together.

"See the W-pattern of stitching and the three rivets in there? Parachute manufacturers came up with this W-pattern; they did stress-testing, and it seems to be most effective. When you have a half-leather, and only two rivets there, it isn't a very safe saddle.

"Also look at the buckles on the stirrup leather to make sure they aren't corroded and, again, check the rivets. Here, the condition of the leather is really important. Check the holes (in the stirrup leather) to make sure they aren't cracked. Be sure the leather is nice and supple."

The saddlemaker pointed out that when most people clean saddles, they clean only the parts that they can see and fail to pull the stirrup leathers down and oil them at the top, where they go around the bar. "There is a lot of stress on the area that's over the bar, and it needs to be oiled and kept clean," he said, adding that the stirrup leather should not be bone-dry or cracked when considering a used saddle for purchase.

"The last element in our seating system is the stirrup, U-shaped with a bolt going through the top. Sometimes the nut on the bolt comes off and, when the bolt works out, the stirrup will break. So check that. Grab the stirrup; if it doesn't feel wobbly, it's probably pretty safe."

The Skirting System

"The job of this system is to help protect the horse from the stirrup leathers that move back and forth. The skirting system also serves as

a base for the wool.

"The wool is important. It is a buffer zone between the horse's back and the bars of the saddle," said Dave. "Wool fiber is like little springs that stay springy even when they get wet, and that's important. If a saddle has artificial fleece, it won't operate as well. Artificial wool has a tendency, once it gets wet, to lose its body. There are different grades of the artificial, but get the real wool if you can possibly afford it. On a new saddle, that will cost you \$100 to \$110 more, but it's really worth the investment."

On a used saddle, Dave said, "You can clean the wool. If it's really dirty, rub Woolite in with a brush, then rinse it out well to get the wool fluffier. On older saddles with the wool beginning to pull out, you can get the saddle refleece. Old-type saddles usually have two rows of stitching around the skirting. The one row of stitching holds the pieces of leather in place; the other row is to hold the wool, with the idea that it will be cut in order to replace the wool."

Dave stressed the function of the

To clean a saddle well, Dave cautioned, it is necessary to rotate the stirrup leather so that the area wrapped over the tree also can be cleaned and oiled.

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skirting system in another respect—the horse's movement. "Because the skirting system is to move out of the way, it needs to be flexible. The horse is bending and moving; you want the front (of the saddle) to be open and flexible so it won't interfere with the horse at all.

"The saddle (skirts) should not be laced in the rear. Both sides of the horse do not move at the same time," he noted. "You don't want anything that will carry movement from one side to the other, so it's always good to leave that rear part open and flex-

ible so the horse can move. Somebody decided it was pretty to lace the skirts. This makes the rear of the skirts really rigid, and you get chafing on the horse's back.

"As far as the condition of the skirting system," the saddlemaker added, "it's common sense. You want the leather in good shape.

In conclusion, Dave said, "Always look for three distinct systems: the rigging system, the seating system, and the skirting system. Look to see that they are separate systems and that each is in good condition."

Questions and Answers

Following his presentation, Dave Genadek answered questions posed by audience members. Here are a few of those questions and his response to each.

How old is a horse when his back structure is matured?

"Five. All horses develop at the same rate. The growth plates in the back do not fuse together until a horse is 5 or 6. When you are riding a horse before he is 5 or 6, you are in danger of injuring his back, so you want to be sure that the saddle is working the way it should. If you are a person who loves horses and you want to do things right, don't do any heavy riding until after they are 5 or 6.

What about the older horse with more prominent withers?

"When you have an older

horse, it's a natural for the back to drop. The back starts dipping, and the saddle starts bridging, causing pressure points on the wither and loin.

"When you pad, use one simple rule: Pad away from pressure until there is no pressure. Most people tell you, if you have a saddle causing pressure right here, to put more padding there. That's like putting another sock in a shoe that doesn't fit right. What you need to do is pad the middle until it lifts that pressure off. Especially on the older horse, the ring of muscles is no longer functioning at optimal levels. It's stretching, so the back begins to dip. You compensate for that by filling in the dip.

"If you pad the middle and do not use both cinches so that the middle of the saddle is resting on the horse's back (in the correct pressure zone), you can compound the problem because the saddle will tip even more. If you pad up, you must secure the rear end of the saddle. If you are dead set against using a rear cinch, you can take your front dee and the rear dee and use the latigo to form

a triangle between the two, which will hold the rear of the saddle down and still help relieve pressure on the front."

What's the ideal padding?

"If the saddle fits the horse properly and all systems are functional, you should need nothing more than a Navajo blanket."

What if you have pressure on the front part of the saddle, no matter what the horse's age?

"You pad the middle. The back is curved, and that's one plane—the back plane. The bar plane is out of sync with the back plane; they are not parallel anymore. We need to make them parallel, but we can't change the bar; that's rigid. However, we can take some foam and fill in the area to lift pressure off those points at the front."

How can you tell if your saddle is putting pressure in the wrong places?

"Dry spots, behaviors. When you put a saddle on a horse and it creates pressure, it also restricts the circulation. If it's restricting circulation, the horse doesn't sweat there, so it creates a dry spot. And often a horse will be crabby if he's uncomfortable." 🐾

saddle, because the low point was farther back in relation to the stirrup, forces the rider into using his legs in too forward a position and "puts you back," Dave pointed out, "as if you are sitting in a chair."

Once a horseman determines that a saddle allows him to be in the correct position for riding, it's important, said Dave, "to check that area for safety and comfort. Here, again, check the condition of the leather."

"When you look at the seating, make sure there are no big bumps in this area (underneath the seat jockey). You often see a big bump here because of the way the rear housing has been put on," which can be uncomfortable for the rider.

According to Dave, a custom saddle has one continual piece of leather used in the seat construction, and that may not be the case on a manufactured saddle. On less expensive saddles, a bump can often be felt where the leather in the seat has been pieced or has not been skived well to lay smoothly on the tree. "Take your hand," he recommended, "and really feel the seat for any bumps."

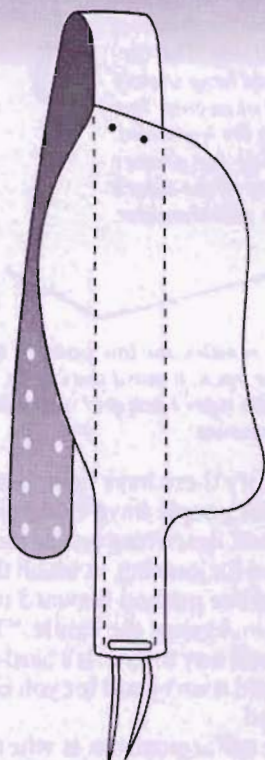
"Safety-wise, the fender is the most important area. That's where most stress on your saddle will be. There are two ways to put fenders together. One

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Dave displayed a half-leather in which the fender and stirrup leather are separate pieces joined together. Notice the stitched W with the three rivets at the seam.

FULL LEATHER



These two illustrations show the difference in the construction of a fender using a full stirrup leather and one using a half-leather, which attaches to the top of the fender.

HALF-LEATHER

