

Quick Tips on How to Buy a Sidesaddle

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This article is designed to help you avoid costly mistakes in your search for a sidesaddle. For information on how to ride sidesaddle, pictures and parts of the sidesaddle, and on the different types (vintage and new) available, see the resources cited at the end. This article covers a few saddlery basics and some common problems with available sidesaddles.

Look Before You Leap!

The most important part of buying a sidesaddle is research. Sadly, many of the new sidesaddles being manufactured overseas are unridable and poorly made. But, with a bit of research you can learn to recognize these and avoid them.

What Should A Sidesaddle Do For You?

A sidesaddle should support you in a comfortable, centered, well-balanced, and safe riding position. If someone looked at you from the back, from the hips up you would look exactly as you look riding astride—no tilt, no twist. With your right leg over the upright pommel and your left leg under the down-curving leaping horn, you should feel safe and secure. The first requirement for feeling safe and secure is a saddle that fits both you and the horse.

What Size For You?

Americans measure sidesaddles lengthwise from the front edge of the upright pommel to the center back of the cantle, and widthwise across the widest part of the seat. If you sit on a hard surface with your back straight, the flat surface distance from the line of your spine to the bend of your knee, plus about an inch, is a good guide for how long the saddle should be. For seat width, measure the flat distance across your seat on a hard chair; this measurement can be fudged a bit more than the length. The best method of measuring is to sit on the saddle, if possible.

What Size for Your Horse?

As with any saddle, it is essential the sidesaddle properly fits your horse. English-style sidesaddles come in tree widths, sometimes called by names (narrow, medium, wide, extra-wide) and sometimes by numbers (1 through 5, with 1 being very narrow and 5 being very wide). Western sidesaddles also come in widths, but with a different style tree and naming system. The most common are quarter horse bars and semi-quarter horse bars. Antique catalog and vintage western sidesaddles were often built on narrow bars, so query the seller before buying one for a wide modern horse.

What Unridable Means

Unridable means any of the following: uncomfortable, badly balanced, poorly designed, or unsafe. Some sidesaddles are all of the above!

Uncomfortable

English-style sidesaddles are stuffed asymmetrically, with more padding on the left to help the saddle remain level under the rider's weight. You will find some sidesaddles are stuffed backwards, with more stuffing in the right side making them lean left. This causes a constant scramble to lean right in compensation. Another way the sidesaddle may be uncomfortable is by sticking out in the wrong places. Some lovely western sidesaddles of current design have part of the front of the tree digging into your right leg. This might be bearable for a five-minute show class, but imagine it after a three-mile ride.

Badly Balanced

The saddle should support you in a centered position, so from the back you appear to be seated astride from the seat up. Some new

sidesaddles are built on unbalanced, off-center trees, with more saddle on the left than on the right. Look at the sidesaddle from the back to see if it looks high on the right or has more saddle to the left. If it is leaning left, you will also lean left, and feel as if you're falling off. Two things can happen: you constantly try to twist right to a centered position, or you *do* fall off. It's also not uncommon for the new import saddles to have twisted trees, which will make centering nearly impossible. One way to check is to look at the saddle from the back, and run an imaginary line across the cantle from side to side, and across the front of the saddle from side to side. Are the two lines parallel? Good. If they're at opposing angles, the tree is twisted and it will be very difficult to balance.

Poorly Designed

The most common design flaw the upright pommel leaning right. The right-leaning pommel prevents you from getting your knee across your horse's withers, ruining your alignment and balance. Another common flaw is to set the stirrup leather too far back. It should be aligned pretty much under the leaping horn. If it's too far back, you will have balance and twist problems, plus your leg will be unable to grip the leaping horn in an emergency. A third fairly common flaw is the leaping horn itself being too far back, forcing the left leg out of position and destroying any hope of centering yourself. Compare the position of the leaping horn with known examples of good saddles to spot this flaw. Fourth, beware of leaping horns with standard screw threads. The leaping horn should be reverse-threaded to prevent it working loose while riding. A final very common, usually cosmetic, flaw, is the leaping horn curving up instead of down. Though more often a sign the seller knows nothing about sidesaddles than as a flaw in the saddle, the mounting threads may be stripped, or the screw too small. Find out if the leaping head sits in the proper position.

Some sidesaddles have a perfectly level seat, while others dip. (Different from the "cradle" a western seat makes around you.) A slight dip is not a flaw, though some say it makes jumping harder. A greater dip, like what you see in an astride saddle or many sidesaddles without a leaping head, is hard to ride. However, some riders find some of these saddles to be comfortable. That decision is yours. If you are uncomfortable, that is not the saddle for you.

Unsafe

Many riders feel more secure in a sidesaddle than astride. In a properly designed sidesaddle, your legs can take an incredibly strong scissors-grip on the upright pommel and leaping horn, making it very difficult to lose your seat. However, several factors can make this safe grip less secure. As noted above, if the stirrup leather is placed too far back, it becomes impossible to grip the leaping horn. If the saddle is leaning to the left, the resulting twist to the body can also prevent the correct scissor-grip effect. The turn of your body puts your legs out of position while unbalancing your upper body and playing havoc with your center of gravity. A period or catalog sidesaddle may not have a leaping horn at all. Some sidesaddle riders will advise you not to ride these until a competent sidesaddler has installed a leaping horn; others maintain it is no big problem. Certainly, having the leaping horn is safer.

English-style sidesaddles use a balance strap, a long diagonal extra girth running from the offside rear to the nearside front. The balance strap helps keep the back of the sidesaddle from shifting to the left. You may find period and catalog sidesaddles modified with this safety feature. Keepers are used to fasten the balance strap to the girth where they cross under the horse, to prevent the balance strap from slipping back and becoming a bucking strap.

Common Flaws in New Sidesaddles

1. Upright pommel leans right.
2. Tree twisted.
3. Stirrup leather out of position.
4. Panels stuffed improperly.
5. Balance strap billet on English sidesaddle missing or incorrectly placed (slanting backward or on wrong side).
6. Standard screw thread used for leaping horn—will constantly work loose. Should be reverse-threaded.
7. Billets too far back, causing the girth to fall around the ribcage (girth should fall in same place as an astride saddle girth would).
8. Upright pommel too short, allowing leg to slip over the top.
9. If present, dees for sandwich case improperly placed (cosmetic, but a warning sign that less noticeable problems may exist).
10. Overlarge off flaps are a carry-over from outdated saddles (cosmetic, but again a warning sign to watch for other problems).

Common Flaws in Old Sidesaddles

1. Broken tree.
2. Unsafe billets/girthing system.
3. Rotted leather, missing stuffing, dry rot (may not be visible).
4. No leaping horn.
5. Upright pommel too short, allowing leg to slip over the top
6. Wrong size: Seat too short for many modern women; tree too narrow for many modern horses.

Common Flaws in Western Sidesaddles

1. Poorly designed tree causes rider to slide left (check from the rear for level seat).
2. Rigging attached to sidesaddle skirt rather than to tree. Cannot be properly tightened and will not remain stable.
3. One-size-fits-all seat. This doesn't work well for clothing; it works even worse for saddles.

Sources for Sidesaddles

eBay

There are some marvelous saddles on eBay; unfortunately, there are also some horrible ones. Be very careful with any sidesaddle labeled “new”. These are mostly cheap Pakistan and India imports and many are unrideable. Ask the seller for clear photos from the front, back, and sides, so you can check for right-leaning upright pommel, twisted tree, misplaced balance strap billet, and stirrup placement. You would not be unreasonable to arrange before bidding for a money-back guarantee if the saddle doesn't work out. Some imports are safe and rideable, but tragically these are not in the majority yet.

Vintage English sidesaddles command the highest prices on eBay. Despite the higher prices, they're often the best buy for a quality saddle. They're generally best suited to breeds with well-defined withers, and can be a poor choice for round-bodied horses such as Arabians, Morgans, or old-style QHs. When bidding on these, familiarize yourself with the recognized English names such as Whippy, Mayhew, Champion & Wilton, Owen, and Martin & Martin and be able to recognize them! (See the list of resources at the end). If in doubt, ask the seller for confirmation and save the answer. There was one incident of a seller claiming a cheap import sidesaddle was actually an antique Mayhew, so *caveat emptor!*

Many old “Victorian”/period/catalog sidesaddles are sold on eBay. Two things to remember are that it costs a lot more to fix them up than you think it does, and most are too small for today's women and horses. However, these can be a good buy for the right person.

Your Local Tack Store

Your local tack store may have a good vintage English-style sidesaddle for sale, but is almost certainly not going to have a good new English-style sidesaddle for sale. Makers of good new sidesaddles in the US are rare, while the Pakistan and India imports

are rarely rideable. Do all the checks above, and also check the leather quality. If the leather has a bad smell and feels cardboard-like or brittle, consider passing up that saddle.

You might find an American-made western sidesaddle at your tack shop. Before you fall in love with the gorgeous tooling and silver, check just as you would an import. Some are fine; some have trees that dump you to the left side; one has a rather uncomfortable tree extension under the right knee. Ask for advice from any of the resources listed at the end, especially the Yahoo!Group. However, you have to be the final judge of “is it worth it?”

Mail Order

Mail or internet order sources fall into two categories: standard tack shops and specialized sidesaddleries. Be very careful ordering from a standard tack shop; they mostly carry cheap imports. Be sure to get a money-back guarantee.

Specialized sidesaddleries are listed at the end of this pamphlet. Some broker good-quality vintage saddles; some sell both antique and new. Some build custom saddles from the tree up. So far I've found all are happy to help educate you in buying a good and rideable sidesaddle. One even carries a pretty nice Pakistan import saddle for those on a budget: it's called the Elan, available from Hundred Oaks. The owner has gained a reputation for tight quality control on these saddles.

Finally

When you find a saddle you think is the right one, get a trial period and money-back guarantee. Try it out, make sure it's the right size, see if your horse is happy with it. Approach buying a sidesaddle the same way you would buy a pair of shoes. Remember, you might be able to stuff your feet into a pair of shoes a size too small, but you will never dance in them.

For Further Research:

Books

- Side-saddle Riding for Beginners, by Charlotte Kneeland (©1994, Yesteryear Publishing Company, Alton Bay, NH)
- Side Saddle Riding, by Betty Skelton (©1988, Reprinted 1992, Redwood Press Ltd, Melksham, UK)
- Riding Side-saddle, by Janet W. MacDonald (©1995, J. A. Allen & Co., Ltd., London, UK)
- The Sidesaddle Legacy, Martha Coe Friddle & Linda A. Bowlby (©1994, The World Sidesaddle Federation, Inc., Bucyrus, OH)

Websites (more sidesaddle links available within sites)

- International Side Saddle Organization (ISSO)
<http://www.sidesaddle.com>
- NEA Sidesaddle Association
<http://www.sidesaddleinfo.com>
- Hundred Oaks (Sidesaddle Sales and Information)
http://members.aol.com/_ht_a/SIDESADL/onlinewest.html
- Heritage Tack & Saddlery
<http://www.snowcrest.net/sadlmakr/>
- Aside Line (Information & Accessory Sales)
<http://www.asideline.com/>
- Yahoo!Groups Sidesaddle List
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sidesaddle/>

Disclaimer: This article contains the best, soundest advice the author could collect. However, nothing in this handout should be taken as expert or final authority on sidesaddles. The buyer, as always, must make a final decision using her own judgment and research.

Previous editions of this article mentioned the World Sidesaddle Federation, Inc. (WSFI). In 2005, WSFI merged with the International Side-Saddle Organization (ISSO).