

WHAT'S IN YOUR SADDLE? And Why It's Important

Technology has created more choices, but do high tech materials, (versus natural materials) actually produce a better saddle and performance or just cheaper production costs? And what are the options? Let's take a critical look.

Written by David Young, Independent British Master Saddler. For over 40 years David Young has worked on virtually every make and model of saddle on the planet. Here, in a nutshell, are his thoughts on what works best for the horse.

SYNTHETIC/FOAM PANELS

Foam panels are often pitched as the high tech alternative to wool which does not have to be adjusted. The fact is, they can't be adjusted like wool. Petroleum based synthetics tend to be more heat producing than natural materials. Because foam panels are normally molded and pre-formed and typically used with synthetic trees, they are the choice of many manufacturers because they can be made more quickly and inexpensively. The problem is every horse's back is different, not "pre-formed". Sorry folks. There is no such thing as "it fits everything in the barn" regardless of the which panel material is used and pads can't solve the problems. Foam/Synthetic panels do not naturally conform to the polymorphous shapes of a horse's back and can't be adjusted to compensate for asymmetry or changes resulting from age, conformation, condition, training regimen, season, injury etc. All panels, foam or wool, compress over time. When this happens foam panels must be completely replaced, whereas, wool flocked panels can be re-flocked after many years of use or simply topped off or adjusted when necessary.



NATURAL WOOL FLOCKED PANELS

In my opinion, natural wool has always been and continues to be the quality choice for flocking panels. Wool is extremely comfortable on the horse's back and facilitates even weight distribution. Wool consists of long, medium and short strands that can conform to the shapes of the horse's back and can be easily adjusted to compensate for asymmetry or changes resulting from age, conformation, condition, training regimen, season, injury, etc. Wool can be completely replaced in older saddles for relatively little cost without having to replace the panel itself. Wool panels may need to be periodically topped off or adjusted to compensate for compression or changes in the horse's condition; typically once or maybe twice a year. This is considered by most to be a small price to pay for comfort, soundness and optimal performance. It is important to note that none of the panel materials discussed can compensate for a poorly designed saddle. But at the end of the day don't just take my word for it, ask yourself what you would rather have on your back. Or better yet, forget about all the hype and just ask the final arbiter. Your horse. **SR**

