

Judging at The Society of Master Saddlers (SMS) National Saddlery Competition

Each year The Worshipful Company of Saddlers, one of the oldest London Guilds with close ties to the Saddlery trade, generously host this competition organised by the SMS. Held at Saddlers Hall near St Pauls Cathedral, London, it is a beautiful and historic setting for members.

The class for a new or refurbished side saddle is usually a popular one. Refurbished means the original tree from an old saddle can be used, but everything else must be new. Photographic evidence of this is required. The class has run since the year 2000 and the winner receives a lovely trophy presented by the SSA who have always encouraged and supported the training of side saddlers.

I have been honoured several times to be asked to judge alongside Richard Godden, probably the best side saddler in the country. Trained by Champion and Wilton, he has over fifty years experience in this field.

Saddles which are entered are numbered, not named, for impartial judging. We start by gaining an overall impression of the saddles and the quality. Then each saddle is examined closely. We are not given a strict time limit in which to judge and this allows us to be extremely thorough. It can take two to three hours to judge a class depending on the number of entries. No snap decisions are made here!

Style and colour are personal choices so aren't judged. Starting with the top of the saddle, shape and balance of the seat is assessed. Contrary to popular belief they are not completely flat but have a point of balance and should support the rider and we check these points are in the correct places. We don't want riders sliding to the left. Some can be slightly dipped to accommodate different thigh/derriere shapes but this must also be correct.

The pommels, whether narrow or triangular, must support the rider's legs in the correct position comfortably. If triangular, the leather part mustn't flex when pressure is applied otherwise the rider will be unstable. The leaping head must be at the correct angle and fixed tightly in place. Both must be in proportion to the size of saddle.

Flaps and straps are then examined. The safety release cover is checked to ensure it will allow the stirrup leather to come away smoothly and quickly. Safety is paramount.

Lifting the flaps, girth straps come into scrutiny. Are they symmetrical both sides? Are they strong? Is the point strap on the left at the correct angle? If positioned straight down, it could pull the saddle left. If pointing to the rear at too acute an angle, the saddle could twist. Is the Balance Strap correctly positioned at the widest part of the seat?

We then turn our attention to the Panel or Wykeham Pad. Is it the correct size and shape for that saddle? Attached centrally and tightly? Is the gullet too wide or too narrow? One can cause lateral instability, the other pinch the spinous processes. Do both halves of the Panel have sufficient bearing surface? Is it correctly balanced? At the front, especially on the right hand side, we want it constructed and attached high enough so that it doesn't drive into the side of the horses wither when the rider is on board. Is the Panel flocking firm enough to protect the horses back as well as support the rider? Is the flock smooth and free of pressure points? Do the shims used to adjust the fit on the Wykeham Pad correctly support and balance or do they change the angle of the pad and create potential pressure points?

Along with assessing all of the above points (and more), we also take in the overall quality of materials and workmanship. Is it clean, neat, tidy and fit for purpose? By now we have an idea of the top three but we'll go through them once again in case we've overlooked anything. We make notes, decide the Premium Awards (80% + of the marks) and make our final selection. We double check we're satisfied with our decision and then hand our results to those preparing the certificates and medals.

The winner of each of the twelve classes at the competition is also put forward to be judged for the overall 'Best in Show'. This is decided by all of the judges present.

All that's left now is to wait until the evening for the prize giving. Tickets labelled 'Prize Winner' are attached to the top three saddles, but the owners won't know until their names are called whether they are first, second or third. The SMS version of the Oscars!

Laura Dempsey. Master Saddler.



Clare Barnett winner of the 2015 Side Saddle Class.