

PREPARE YOUR HORSE FOR A SIDE SADDLE

You cannot simply plonk it on and hope for the best if you care for your horse/pony! The side saddle will sit further back than an astride version and weighs at least 6kg heavier, basically with the weight bearing surface sitting on the back muscles behind the normal position of a cross saddle, and across behind the wither, any further forward and it would ride on the withers, causing bruising and in some cases continuous rubbing comes up in a large fistulous swelling on the opposite side of the wither to the leaping head. The saddle needs to be balanced and fit both rider and the horse. This fitting ideally requires you to have the assistance of a good SSA instructor and a saddler specialising in side saddles, ideally together. The rider will also need to spend time fittening muscles not normally used astride!

To prepare the horses back for a side saddle is really quite simple - grooming and schooling. Years ago horses were very fit and grooms spent time strapping the horses daily. The side saddle tree was made to fit the horse and the leaping head, fixed head and seat were custom made to fit the rider. Today owing to costs and skill, there are very few new side saddles and so we ride on the original antique saddles and they need to be handled with care, as they were built on a wooden tree. Mainly they had flocked panels underneath, lined in linen or serge, however there were wickham pads which strapped onto the tree skeleton and fitted more horses. A wickham is a lot easier to fit to a round cob. I always advise the use of a good numnah that fits your make of side saddle and never remove the saddle patch when clipping.

So taking ten minutes daily before you ride, using either your hands, body brush or dandy brush [only if thick coated] following the lie of the coat with long soft strokes in time with the movement of the muscles works wonders. Start from the neck and withers, taking care not to apply pressure over the loins as that is the weakest point. When first riding it helps to ride one day astride and one day side saddle, that way you can regularly check for any heat, rubs or soreness especially near to the wither and back area by running your hands over the horses body when you take the saddle off. Build up the exercise time slowly from 20 - 30 minutes and if he is sharp, do two short sessions if you have the time. Hill and pole work help to supple and strengthen the muscles of the shoulders and quarters, building up more muscle to the rear of the saddle. Keeping everything very simple, lovely long canters are better for the horse than trot work, if you have the green lanes to enjoy.

Having had a day out hunting /or if he is very hot, do not immediately remove the saddle, dismount and let them cool off, give the horses back time for the circulation to return to normal, then remove the saddle and run your hands over his body to check for heat, rubs and lumps, remember to check the girthing areas, especially the balance straps, really the girth must be wider than a normal three fold leather girth as the saddle is heavier and needs more support. A wash down with vinegar and warm water can be very beneficial, if you have any areas where the hair has rubbed bare, something like aloe vera gel /sudocreme etc works well. Do not put the saddle on again until the back has healed or you find the cause. Horses change shape, flocking goes down very quickly, change the numnah if it has rubbed, and you might need to recheck the fitting of the saddle.

At a show rest your horse's back regularly by dismounting between classes and in the ring when it is a large class. In no time at all you and your horse will be enjoying many happy side saddle hours together, simply because you took the time to care for your horses back.

Oh I almost forgot the most important thing of all take great care of your side saddle – it needs to be clean and supple and safe.

Good luck

Nadya Brown, Vice Chairman,