

Barefoot Saddles – the stabilising effect of our vps[®] System sets us apart from other treeless saddles

Saddles were originally designed to fit the rider and not the horse. Horses were “beasts of labour” – working in the fields or as army horses carrying soldiers and heavy equipment. The saddle’s primary function was to keep the soldier firmly in place and carry heavy weapons and material. The only material available to form the tree was either metal or wood. Horses certainly suffered from severe saddle sores in the past; well documented in Gustav Rau’s book “Altgold – the story of a war horse”.

Equestrian sport tends to be conservative and much of the theory contains old traditions and methods from days gone by, leaving the construction and structure of saddles practically unchanged and rooted in old traditions.

The search for a suitable, correctly fitting saddle is often a long and difficult process. Faced with an endless choice of types and models, making the right decision is almost impossible. Riders who lose patience or have been given the wrong advice will often end up with an unsuitable, badly fitting saddle.

As horses tend not to show signs of discomfort or pain clearly, they are often ridden with ill-fitting saddles for years. A sensitive rider will of course notice subtle signs of discomfort such as head-shaking or tail-swishing or when the horse is generally tense and unsettled, but it often takes time for them to locate the saddle as the cause of the problem.

The horse often demonstrates unwillingness to be saddled and tries to avoid the saddle – this is not bad behaviour on the part of the horse but rather the sign of a badly-fitting saddle which is causing the animal discomfort or even pain.

Runners need well-fitting, flexible shoes which adapt to the athlete’s movement. Badly fitting or inflexible shoes prevent one from running fast or covering longer distances. If you wanted to go hiking, you certainly wouldn’t choose rigid wooden shoes, which would make every step extremely painful. Your muscles would stiffen up and the normal sequence of movement would become impossible. This is exactly what happens to a horse under a rigid, ill-fitting saddle.

How can the rider recognise a badly fitting saddle?

Badly fitting saddles are either too narrow in the shoulder region, leading to a significant restriction of the horse’s movement: The resulting atrophy of the trapezius muscles is clearly noticeable in high, bony withers with distinct indentations to the left and right; an imprinted “saddle area”. These are typical signs of receding musculature. On the other hand, when the weight of the saddle rests on the spinous processes, thereby restricting the movement of the dorsal muscles, pain and muscular tension and later even saddle sores occur. The horse becomes heavier on the forehand and cannot carry its weight from its hind quarters.





The biggest advantage of Barefoot saddles is their flexibility in all directions.

The long vertebral muscle cannot move freely and the horse is unable to arch its back upward. Uneven or badly-fitting padding which distributes the rider's weight unevenly over the horse's back can also lead to problems.

In the saddle, the rider is seated on the animal's spine, or, more precisely, directly on the spinous processes of the vertebrae. The construction of the spine is similar to a suspension bridge hanging between the shoulder blades and the pelvis. In simple terms, what happens with a badly fitting saddle is that the horse will arch its back downwards, trying to avoid the pain from the inflexible saddle construction. The suspension bridge begins to sag and the long dorsal muscle cannot move freely; the horse is forced to use it to carry the rider's weight. But this muscle was never intended to carry weight; its sole purpose is to move the horse forwards, which it can only do if allowed to move freely and arch upwards.

With this understanding, the Barefoot physiotherapist team developed the treeless Saddle System vps® – the flexible Barefoot saddle which adapts to the contours of the horse's back. The main advantage of our saddles is their flexibility in all directions. Even changes in the horse's musculature due to illness or change of season can be compensated by the saddle.

A horse's back is constantly in movement and only a saddle which follows that movement will allow the horse to move naturally under its rider and arch its back upward. No treed saddle adapts to the horse's natural movement the way a Barefoot saddle does.

Muscles can only be built up if they have unrestricted blood supply. Pressure on muscles means the blood supply is restricted and as a result, we often see a reduction in musculature under conventional saddles, muscle fibres adhere to each other instead of producing muscle increase through proper training. So it is very important to have a saddle which can react and adapt to changes in stature and muscle build resulting from illness, training, or age.



Muscle structure previous to using a Barefoot saddle



After riding with a Barefoot saddle for one year

The vps® System

What is the difference between Barefoot saddles and other treeless saddles? There are indeed very significant differences between treeless models currently available on the market and in a way it is like comparing apples and oranges.

Our vps® System puts Barefoot Saddles apart from other treeless products; the built-in vps® (Vertebrae Protecting System) is approximately comparable to a flexible tree. So the Barefoot saddle is nothing like a bare-back pad or a saddle pad, as people often assume. The Bareback is a stable saddle, constructed to be as flexible as necessary yet as firm as possible without restricting the horse's movement.

The integrated vps® System allows pressure to be evenly distributed over the entire length of the saddle. The panel construction on either side of the spinal canal guarantees optimal freedom of movement for the horse's spine and neither its back nor shoulders are restricted by rigid components. Even when standing in the stirrups (rising trot) the rider's weight is distributed evenly over the entire length of the saddle – there is no weight limit for riders.

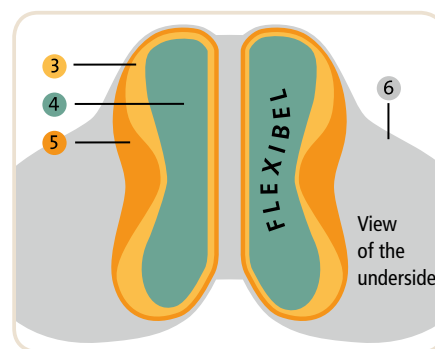
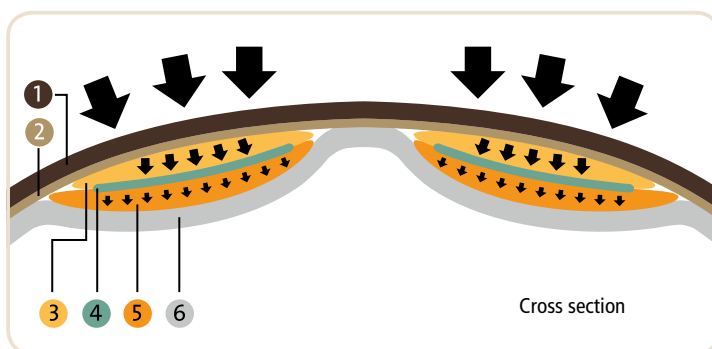
Barefoot use only smooth-surfaced materials which do not form lumps or become unevenly distributed. We use a thick layer of fleece to create a soft layer

next to the horse's back and reduce any unevenness. The whole construction is compact, allowing communication between horse and rider with a minimum of riding aids.

Until the introduction of the vps® System in 2008, our saddles were only suitable for riders weighing less than 80 kilos. Until then, problems occurred with pressure peaks under the stirrup attachments, especially with heavier riders who frequently stood up in the stirrups. Since the beginning of 2008, all Barefoot Saddles have been fitted with the vps® System, making any weight limit for riders obsolete.



Structure of the vps® System



- 1 Surface material (Leather or DryTex™)
- 2 Cushioning PU foam insert
- 3 First layer of pressure-absorbing elastomer
- 4 Polymer insert spreads pressure
- 5 Second layer of pressure-absorbing elastomer
- 6 Smooth fleece layer

The Barefoot Saddle System

All our Barefoot saddles are lightweight; even our Western models weigh in at between 4 and 8 Kilos, which means your horse has less weight to carry.

Barefoot saddles have been used with great success in a number of 1000-mile events in Mongolia, South Africa, Scotland, Kazakhstan etc.

Read riders' testimonies on our website under:

<http://barefoot-saddle.com/de/Ein-langer-Ritt-fuer-einen-guten-Zweck/>

<http://barefoot-saddle.com/de/Kate-Godfrey-Autorin/>

<http://barefoot-saddle.com/de/Alpenueberquerung-mit-dem-Barefoot-Nevada/>

The Barefoot Saddle System distributes the rider's weight in a completely different way to any conventional or other type of saddle. The rider sits between two preformed parts which are integrated in "pockets" in the saddle. These pre-formed parts are hardly affected by the rider's weight, so they can move freely with the horse and without restricting its movement. This is why the barefoot saddle can be placed a lot further forward than a conventional saddle, directly over the horse's shoulder, as the scapula can still move freely and no pressure is exerted on the muscles. Saddling the horse in this way puts the rider in an optimal position (on vertebrae 9 – 12/13) directly above the horse's centre of gravity.

Regarding the overall length of the saddle, it allows greater freedom of movement even under the rear preformed part because it does not convey the pressure of the rider's weight onto the horse's back. There is no padding to put pressure on the dorsal muscles thus enabling horses, especially those with shorter backs, to arch upwards more easily.

Barefoot is not simply a saddle but a complete system: Saddle plus an exchangeable pommel insert plus anatomically formed saddle pads and individually tailored additional padding. Once in use, Barefoot saddles adapt to fit the horse's stature, so they can be used on any rideable horse; they must however be customised in order to fit the individual horse's back. Using a treeless saddle does not mean that you can dispense with having it fitted to suit the individual horse.

This is achieved on the one hand by using the appropriate pommel insert and on the other hand by tailoring the saddle pad so that it follows the line of the horse's back, ensuring that the saddle a) does not encumber the movement of the shoulder and b) is aligned horizontally, thus distributing the rider's weight evenly and giving him a well-balanced seat. These simple adjustments can be carried out by the rider himself in a few easy steps, even in cases where there has been a considerable change in the horse's build.

The Barefoot Saddle System can only function properly if all its components are optimally matched. This means choosing the correct pommel insert plus a saddle pad with exchangeable inserts tailored to suit the shape of your horse's back. As in any type of saddle – conventional, treeless or sheepskin – problems such as saddle sores can also occur with a treeless saddle if it is not fitted correctly or does not suit the horse's particular breed or build.

Barefoot saddles give you an especially good fit; they are not perched on the horse's back like a dish, but adapt to fit the horse's individual stature. After an initial adjustment period in which the saddle adapts to the shape of the horse, it will sit securely on the horse's back and will not slip, even on difficult terrain. The vps® System give your horse added comfort as it absorbs the pressure of the rider's weight and distributes it evenly while at the same time affording constant freedom of movement for its spine.

The Barefoot System needs a few hours to adapt to the individual horse and a brand new saddle may feel a bit "wobbly" at first or sit like a throne on top of the horse. But our materials are chosen to allow the saddle to take on the shape of the horse's back without losing its stability. Otherwise, the Barefoot System would be more like a bareback pad which loses its shape immediately as soon as it is used.



New Barefoot saddle



Barefoot saddle after two weeks in use

Generally speaking, Barefoot saddles are suitable for riders who have their horse and its well-being in mind and who realise that good results cannot be achieved if a horse is under physical or mental stress.

In addition, it has been found that riders with back problems are able to ride without discomfort. Because the horse's movement is more relaxed and flowing under a Barefoot saddle, the rider will feel more comfortable and experience less jolting in his back and spinal discs.

Beginners also feel more secure in a Barefoot saddle as it gives better support while at the same time allowing them to feel the movement of the horse more clearly. Barefoot saddles help in training good posture and achieving an independent and well-balanced seat, an advantage for both horse and rider.

Our saddles do not force the rider to take up a rigid position, but allow him to find his natural balance in harmony with the horse. A good seat, indispensable for a good and sensitive rider, can best be spotted without a saddle. A Barefoot saddle will never impair your posture – it will help you achieve a proper seat.

The Barefoot Saddle System is positioned much closer to the horse's back than a conventional saddle. Although its centre channel gives the spinous processes enough space, it is much smaller than a normal saddle, resulting in a much larger contact area with the horse's back. The soft materials close in around the spinous processes, sheathing and protecting them instead of squashing them.

To complete the system, we have developed matching saddle pads for all our models. The centre padding (area over the spinous processes) has been cut out and additional padding can be added to the left and right of the spine to further reduce pressure on the spinous processes. In this way, our system forms a channel which however is not as high as in conventional saddle types, but at the same time brings the rider into closer contact with the horse and reduces pressure on its back. Customers who have changed to the Barefoot System often notice an immediate difference; their horse moves much more freely and lowers its head, a sure sign of reduced tension.



Sweat patterns under a Barefoot saddle

Please note

Riders should above all pay attention to their horse as it will clearly show whether the saddle fits properly. The Bareback System has been on the market for over 12 years and there are horses who will only accept a Barefoot saddle and refuse anything else.

Advantages of the Barefoot Saddle System at a glance

FLEXIBLE in 3 dimensions

- The horse's back can move freely in all directions (up and down as well as left and right).
- The horse's shoulder is not restricted and can operate freely even when it is partly covered by the saddle. (important for horses with short backs).
- Changes in musculature and weight can easily be compensated.
- Horses move more freely and are more contented; riders have a positive riding experience.

VARIABLE

- Saddle can easily be used on several different horses.
- Stirrup attachments can be attached exactly according to the natural position of the rider's leg.
- Either narrow or broad stirrup leathers (or fenders) can be used on the same saddle.
- The seat can be completely replaced by a sheepskin surface (ideal fit, avoids slipping and wrinkling).

LIGHTWEIGHT

- Less weight for the horse and easier handling for the rider.

COMFORTABLE

- Comfortable, soft seat for the rider, especially enjoyable for riders with back problems.

BARRIER-FREE CONSTRUCTION

- Unhindered flow of movement between horse and rider.
- Riders can feel the horse's movement more exactly, allowing communication between horse and rider with a minimum of riding aids.
- Seat aids can be much finer.

ECONOMICAL

- Inexpensive compared to other saddles.
- No saddler's costly padding or adjustments necessary.

Summary

The trend towards treeless saddles is continually increasing, with a host of manufacturers offering a large range of products.

It is interesting to note that the term "treeless saddle" has become such a wide concept that it has become almost meaningless. You can find products which look exactly like conventional saddles, but only without the tree, or where the tree has been replaced with a leather construction. This may work out well at first but, when material fatigue sets in and the saddle buckles in the middle, it will rest on the spinous processes and cause a lot of pain.

The word "treeless" suggests freedom, freedom from restrictions, and many riders automatically take this to mean that the saddle must be good for their horse. This however, is not necessarily true: Unfortunately,

there are many reproductions and look-a-likes on the market, Barefoot is no exception. The quality of these products (materials used, interior construction and workmanship) differs greatly and does not meet the standards of the original in terms of functionality, durability and safety standards. Saddle sores caused by sparse padding, risk of accidents if safety seams are missing, inadequate flexibility and rapid material fatigue can be the result.

So it is not advisable to buy these look-a-likes as they will probably harm you and your horse in the long run.

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Mai 2015