

Why go treeless?

By Anne Bondi BHSI

First we have to ask the question: Why do trees cause problems?

I'm not a saddler!

But from a rider and trainer's point of view, I have known for years that saddles cause problems. I used to keep a wide range of expensive saddles in different fittings to try to provide an optimum fit for any of the horses that I currently had in training. I even had air panels put into some of them, which undoubtedly helped, but I knew it was only alleviating the problem, not solving it. Most people experience problems with saddles and it is common to hear of frustrated riders spending large sums on saddle after saddle that for one reason or another just don't work. It is also common to hear of made to measure saddles failing, although this is not as surprising as it sounds as the saddle may well fit in theory on a *static* horse, but becomes a problem as soon as the horse actually moves. And, as we are all aware, horses change shape constantly throughout their lives. For example, in just a week, a fluctuation of 3 kilos in weight is perfectly normal. The horse carries most of his stored fat deposits over his top line, so even small variations in weight will immediately affect saddle fit.

What are the problems?

a) The tree points.

Most people have seen a saddle stripped down to the tree, and understand that in order to protect the spine from the tree, the gullet has to be wide enough to allow movement and high enough to give wither and spinal clearance.

But few people have perhaps fully understood the design and function of the tree *points*. The front arch that forms the pommel extends down either side into points, just like a clothes peg. It is made of a broad band of steel over the arch, tapering into points that are shaped like table knives. The tips of these are supported by the trapezius muscle, which lies behind the shoulder blade on either side of the withers.

Even with careful fitting, a roomy gullet and a well-flocked panel, the pressure caused by the tree points can cause nerve damage and atrophy of the muscles. Narrower horses are particularly susceptible to this clothes peg effect which will also cause lateral pinching as soon as the horse tries to turn or bend. Over time, these horses show the tell tale hollows either side of the withers.

b) The stirrup bars.

The only part of the structure of the tree that is strong enough to support the stirrup bar is the front arch. This means that all the weight that is loaded onto the stirrup by the rider is taken directly into the tree points, adding to the pressure into the muscle. Bigger horses tend to have heavier riders, so we tend to see greater depletion of the muscle and increased hollows.

c) Scapula push.

As the horse moves his forelimbs, the scapula (shoulder blade) swings forwards and backwards like a pendulum. At the point where it is furthest back, the forelimb generates maximum thrust. At this moment, the scapula pushes against the tree point on that side, causing the whole tree to pivot and the back of the saddle to rotate across the back. The scapula can become restricted or even bruised and the stride pattern will alter, causing shortening, choppiness or even unlevelness. Where there is a lot of bulk around the back of the shoulder due to conformation

(e.g. loaded or wide shoulders) or excessive rat deposits, this will push against the tree points even more and the clothes peg effect will cause rolling; the whole saddle may even slip out of position. Because of this, wide shoulders offer more of a challenge to saddle-fitters.



The stripped down tree shows the tree points with stirrup bar attached

Symptoms of saddle problems

Like most people, my bareback days are sadly long gone, and consequently almost my entire riding life has been on a tree rather than on a horse. One gets used to a wide range of routine problems encountered in the training and development of the horse under saddle.

Most horses are fairly stoical in their role as people-carriers, and will put up with an astonishing amount of pain and discomfort, sometimes displaying symptoms that are too subtle to be readily diagnosed.

So what exactly is a “normal” problem?

- Resentment of being saddled or girthed
- Reluctance to go forward or rushing
- Pawing, plunging head down
- Tense or hollow outline, bridle lameness
- Teeth grinding, poll tilting and tail swishing
- Crooked, unlevel or stiff
- Loss of rhythm
- Above bit in transitions
- Disunited / breaking canter, or favouring one lead
- Resistance, nappiness or spookiness
- Stumbling or stilted going down hills
- Short striding, or difficulty in lengthening the stride
- On the forehand, lacking swing in the back
- Reluctance to stretch the top line or work deep
- Difficulty with some higher level movements e.g. canter pirouette

Jumping is worse!

At the moment of landing, as the horse's front feet touch the ground, the scapula is extended forward and the muscles behind it are stretched and vulnerable. The rider's weight is concentrated onto the tree points as horse and rider's full force touches down. If you add the extra concussive effect from hard ground or a drop landing, this impact onto the points is enormous.



The scapula is extended forward in jumping

Anticipation of the landing may lead to:

- Rushing, or excitable
- Backing off or refusing
- Poor technique or bascule
- Faulty parabola
- Pecking, stumbling or grunting on landing
- Bucking on landing
- Rushing away from the fence
- Carelessness, unexpected lack of scope
- Cat jumping or dropping the hindlegs early

The list is endless! In fact, we get so used to dealing with any of these symptoms on a daily basis, that we think of them as perfectly normal.

But what if they were *NOT* normal?

So why does treeless work?

I have been training and competing in treeless saddles since 2000 and in that time have observed that problems that I had previously considered "normal" began to disappear. Without the clothes peg effect of the tree points restricting the shoulder and surrounding musculature, the forehead suddenly frees up and horses can more readily find their natural balance. Young horses improve confidence and older horse become happier. All the horses that I have tried in treeless saddles have changed - some more dramatically than others, but without exception, all have improved.

Mentally, I would say that their tendency is to be more forward thinking, confident, calm, willing, able to concentrate, and less spooky, resistant, defensive, evasive, naughty etc. The physical changes are a result of this - improved musculature and more power, elasticity and expression.



Freedom in the shoulder produces more expression in the movement

The jumping saddle has produced similarly dramatic results - calmer, cleaner jumping, with improved technique. I feel that the horses are not just able to use their shoulders better, they are also less worried about the tree points slamming in to the back of the scapula on landing. I also find that they don't tire as quickly and can concentrate longer. In fast work, horses that had previously been thought to have a poor natural gallop learned to lower and flatten the frame and significantly developed the stride length.



Confident jumping in the Ansur Konklusion

The American made *Ansur* saddle was the first treeless saddle to come onto the market, and remains the only truly treeless saddle - it has absolutely no rigid parts to cause injury and is completely flexible. There are other makes that have since appeared, but although they describe themselves as treeless, they all have some form of rigid frame, most usually a pommel arch, and could only be described as part-treed, at best. However, the good thing about all of these saddles is that it finally gives riders a *choice*. The result is a greater awareness of saddle issues and long-term benefit to the horse.

There are significant welfare implications in the development and use of the treeless concept.



The Ansur moulds to the shape of the horse's back

Amongst some of the other advantages, I have found that:

- In training:
 - Backing young horses is much easier as they don't seem to mind the girth. Even if they do tighten against it initially, there are no tree points to tighten back into them, which is what frightens them and can lead to freezing or bucking.
 - The treeless can be fitted to any horse, regardless of conformation problems.
 - Horses tire less quickly, both physically and mentally.
 - The stride is freer therefore longer - this has wide ranging implications for dressage, endurance and eventing.
 - Problem horses can benefit - those with cold-backed syndrome, kissing spines and other back conditions.
 - Even where tree point damage has caused muscle atrophy, when tree use is discontinued, there can be considerable rejuvenation, particularly in younger horses.
 - In the clinical evaluation of back-related problems, the Ansur is useful as a diagnostic tool; it is also usefully employed to eliminate the saddle as a possible source of pain.
 - In remedial and rehabilitation work, it is possible for the trainer to feel subtle gait irregularities; this is also extremely useful in the early diagnosis of lameness.

- There are safety considerations too:
 - The treeless is easy to fit, making it straightforward for anyone to use without fear of causing damage to the horse.
 - If the horse should roll or fall on the saddle, he will not injure himself with it.
 - Should the horse fall and trap the rider underneath, the saddle will not cause injury to the rider.



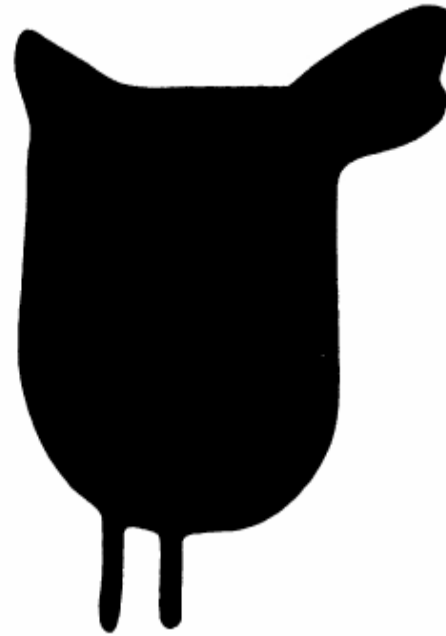
Safety considerations for riders, horses and saddles – the flexible Ansur caused no damage

- The rider benefits too:
 - A particular bonus is the positioning of the stirrup bars which are not restricted to being placed on the tree points, but are positioned for optimum rider balance, making a tremendous difference to comfort and security. Riders are able to adopt a correct position more easily, and also to self-correct.
 - There is no concussion or push from a rigid frame, making it exceptionally good for riders' backs too.
 - Because the horse can more clearly feel the rider and his slightest position changes, he is able to respond more easily to subtle aids.
 - Similarly, the rider can feel every movement in the horse's back, helping in the precision of those aids.
 - The soft, flexible seat allows the rider to spend extended periods in the saddle without seat bone ache.

- Teachers and trainers benefit
 - Instead of spending valuable time working through tension, the trainer can now focus on the positive progression of the quality of the work.
 - The rider becomes easier to teach as he can now concentrate more easily on the harmony of the work, becoming more able to respond to the trainer.
 - Without many of the issues of rider position and balance, the rider can be taught effective use of the aids.

- Treeless is efficient and cost-effective:
 - The rider only needs one saddle for life, because it can be fitted to any horse.
 - No re-flocking, expensive tree repairs or rigid parts to cause wear.
 - Being extremely lightweight makes it easy to carry and to lift. It can be rolled up and transported in a sports bag, or even a flight bag.

The “out of the box” thinking that has been responsible for the development of the treeless concept is still highly controversial. Traditionalists argue that saddles need trees in order to protect the spine. This viewpoint also concedes that it is necessary to protect the horse from the tree. The result is a compromise, but one, which many would maintain, has worked well enough for centuries. But perhaps there is a better way of achieving the aims of comfort and functionality other than just continually improving the same concept. Perhaps it is time for an alternative, even if it means a radical change. There is a growing band of thinking riders who have made the quantum leap of faith and have not looked back.



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