



Saddle Fitting Savvy

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROPER GIRTHING

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At ReactorPanel, we are big fans of science, especially when applied to saddle fit. That said, like any art, there are certain things that we learn to do by feel as our skills around horses grow. For instance, consider tension on the reins or pressure with the leg. The more skilled we are, the lighter our aids and the greater and more immediate the response of our horses; this process is something I think we all aspire to continually improve.

When it comes to tightening the girth, the same educated feel is all-important. As a rule of thumb, you should be able to slip your hand between the side of the horse and the girth or cinch without difficulty. Once there, you should be able to pull the girth about 1/3" away from the horse's side. As you become more sensitive, you will learn to feel what is proper. However, along with feel, there are some important guidelines you should take into consideration to ensure your horse is comfortable.

Guidelines for Proper Girthing

- **Girth Groove:** Locate the horse's natural girth groove. This is where your girth will wind up regardless of how far forward or back it's placed initially. When the horse is girthed in the natural girth groove AND the saddle is placed properly, check the billets (girth straps). Are they exerting neutral pressure on the saddle (straight up and down) or are the girth straps on a diagonal from the saddle to the girth? To provide a proper girthing solution on a range of horses, the saddle needs to have flexibility in the girthing system. For instance: multiple billets (four is ideal or at least three that are well-spaced) or flexible rigging that allows the girthing points to be moved forward or rearward as necessary.
- **Girth Shape:** Is your girth anatomically shaped? There should be width under the belly to reduce pressure, and narrowing behind the elbow to eliminate sores. There are numerous styles and types of girths on the market, so you should have an easy time finding a shape that works for your horse.
- **Girth Give:** Is there some give in the girth? Natural fibers or elastics will both provide give. If using elastic, be sure that the elastic either is centered or on BOTH ends. Elastic on only one side may help the rider's ability to tighten the girth, but does nothing to even the pressure on the horse when it comes to both rib cage expansion and stability of the saddle itself.
- **Buckle Backing:** Be sure there is proper backing behind the buckles of the girth. When the girth is tight, the buckles should be well up onto the sweat flap if you are using a

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long (for instance, jumping) girth. If using a dressage (or short) girth, make sure there is a firm and padded backing to the buckles. You will need to feel behind the buckles when the girth is tight, because many dressage girths do not have sufficient backing and make pressure points in the horse's sides. Replace girths that create pressure points.

- **Buckle Type:** Girths should have roller buckles. These buckles have a metal barrel around the top bar of the girth buckle that permits the girth strap to roll over it when tightening. This extends the life of your billet straps and also makes tightening the girth easier for you and your horse.
- **How to Tighten:** When you tighten the girth, it is best to put the saddle on and tighten the girth gradually. Before the final tightening either walk the horse in hand or pull the forelegs forward in a very gentle stretch to avoid catching folds of skin behind the elbow.
- **Overtightening:** DO NOT OVERTIGHTEN the girth. This is commonly done, and studies show that an overtightened girth limits the ability of the rib cage to expand. While this may or may not hamper the ability of the lungs to expand, it is certainly uncomfortable and may prevent your horse from offering the best performance.
- **Undertightening:** Also, DO NOT UNDERTIGHTEN the girth. The girth is designed to hold your saddle securely in place. A loose girth puts you at risk of the saddle slipping, and puts your horse in danger of having the saddle move on his back, causing pressure, friction, or both. Far from being kind, riding a horse with a too-loose girth may be like running in shoes with no laces.
- **Pressure Points:** When you are feeling under the girth to test the tightness, try slipping your hand beneath the center of the girth and your horse's sternum. You may be surprised to find how tight it is in this area. Consider using girth designs with wide belly plates to dissipate this pressure.
- **Check while riding:** Test the girth for proper tension after you are aboard and the horse is warmed up a bit. Many saddles, saddle pads, or both compress a little bit under the combined weight of yourself and your saddle.



When evaluating a horse's performance or the fit of a saddle, the importance of proper girthing should not be overlooked. When we developed the ReactorPanel System, girthing was a primary concern. Our saddles have 3-4 billets that are well spaced to ensure your girth can rest in the girth groove and provide stability for the saddle. To facilitate the overall effectiveness of the RP System, we developed our Centrelastic Girths. Shaped to comfortably accommodate movement and distribute pressure it works in concert with the saddle and the movement of the horse.

If you have further questions on girthing or other saddle fitting issues, please contact us. We will be happy to address your question in future newsletters.

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