

Soft and safe

To a degree, riding in a treeless saddle is similar to bareback riding, but with the comfort and safety of a saddle, which is usually extremely soft and moulds itself to the shape of the horse. And because there is no tree, it tends to fit many horses of different shapes and sizes, meaning that it's an affordable option of using one saddle for many horses.

You can, however, pad out where necessary with a specially designed saddle pad, to protect the horse's shoulders and back from any local pressure points. And most treeless saddle specialists manufacture their own pads and numnahs.

While it is recognised that a treeless saddle may not suit all horses – and it may not be ideal for a heavy rider – it can be a good option for training youngsters. This is because it distributes the rider's weight equally over the horse's back, therefore enabling a young horse to find his natural balance more easily.

Says Anne Bondi BHSI from Total Saddle Solutions: "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 and naughty. The physical changes are a result of this – improved musculature and more power, elasticity and expression."

Where do I sit?

By the same token, however, a treeless saddle may not suit all riders. Some novices, for example, become disconcerted at the range of movement in the horse, whereas others find they achieve better balance more readily and easily. And



Barefoot Cheyenne GP

there are those who have learnt to ride on a treed saddle, who feel they almost have to re-learn on a treeless.

Says Birgit Michaux, from Saddles:

"With conventional saddles that have a rigid tree, the saddle sits on the horse immovably while the shoulders and legs move. And because of this, the rider sits on top of the saddle, rather than into the horse's movement."

With a treeless saddle, the rider should ideally sit over the horse's centre of

gravity (breast vertebrae 9-13), which creates the best riding position as far as the horse is concerned.

Says horse physiologist and treeless saddle designer, Sabina Uilmann, from Horse and Harmony: "The breast section of the horse's vertebral column is not created naturally for carrying the weight of the rider. The aim of schooling must, therefore, be to build up the horse's muscles, so that it is able to carry our weight without injury."

A true riding horse

Sabina continues: "A horse only becomes a true riding horse when it has learnt to curve its back. Through this curving of the breast segment of the vertebral column, the individual vertebrae joints are opened and there is an improved flow of blood to the muscles, enabling lateral movement of the breast vertebral column. If this motion sequence is hindered by a saddle that sits wrongly and is rigid or by the rider sitting too far back in the saddle, the horse cannot move its back properly."



Treeless saddles improve musculature

Treeless saddles

Horsy shopping

Research by treeless saddle manufacturers suggests that various riding, equine movement and saddle fitting problems can be reduced by using their products. But how do they work?

The theory behind treeless saddle design is that because there is no rigid tree, it is flexible and moves in all directions. This allows the horse to take longer strides, and move more freely through its back and shoulder. And without the restrictions presented by a conventional tree, it is more easy

in many sports.

"In some of the treeless saddles, the rider's weight causes both the pommel and cantle to lift, eliminating most of the pressure on the horse's back," she says.

"The areas that contact the horse are under the rider's thighs and seat bones, and since there is no tree to

"Many horses move much better without a tree, and short-backed horses are easier to fit."

to fit to hard-to-fit horses such as crooked or short-backed ones.

In her book, 'The Horse's Pain-free Back and Saddle-fit Book' (published by Kenilworth Press, price £24.95), American vet Joyce Harman DVM, MRCVS, says that treeless saddles have proven versatile enough for use

provide sharp points, the pressure is typically quite soft.

"Treeless saddles can be useful for all types of trail riding, because most pressure points are eliminated. Many horses move much better without a tree and short-backed horses are easier to fit."



Endurance and dressage riders, and eventers, all riding with treeless saddles

Case history 2

Horse&Rider reader, Moira Lamont, is a huge fan of treeless saddles, having recently bought a Barefoot saddle for her cob. She says: "Admittedly, treeless saddles may not be everybody's cup of tea, but the horses seem to love them – especially my horse. His paces have improved, because he is now able to freely use his shoulders. His previously hollow withers have also filled out and his sway back has improved. What's more, he is far more willing in everything I ask of him.

And yes, it's fine to jump in! "As for the actual riding, that takes a bit of getting used to. For starters, you don't have the same support for your legs as in a treed saddle, as they hang in a more natural way, which means you use muscles not previously used – painful for a while! But it only took about a week for my legs to get used to their new position. Having said that, however, it is the most comfortable saddle I've ever ridden in and I can happily ride in it for hours!"



Moira soon got used to riding treeless