

BUYING A USED MULE SADDLE

Part Two

By Terry Wagner

Over the last twenty-five years, the saddle market has seen the entry of *flex panel* saddles into the market place. These saddles make excellent mule saddles and will fit about ninety percent of the mules and horses on the market today. There are, in comparison to the rest of the saddle making companies out there, just a few custom makers of flex panel saddles.

A flex panel saddle has a rigid tree, usually wood covered with fiberglass and skirt/panel that is separated from the tree. This system flexes to accommodate the gross differences in a mule's or horse's back. Buying one of these saddles used requires a little different regimen from buying a used, standard treed saddle.

First off, you need to set the flex panel saddle on a solid saddle stand, not one made out of tubing. If a tubing stand is used, it may not let the flex panel saddle sit evenly and may cause it to look lop-sided.

Look at the paneled saddle on the stand just as you did the regular saddle. Look at the front and rear of the flex panels. Are they

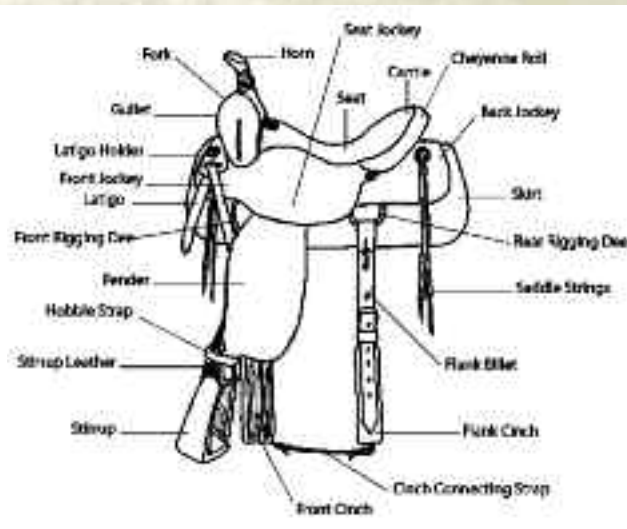


Good panel placement on a flex panel saddle.

even? Next, pull the front of the two panels up into the fork as far as they will go. The two panels should come up into the fork the same on both sides. Look at the fasteners that hold the panel to the tree. The front

fasteners are the easiest to see. They should look the same on both sides, front and rear. Pull the panels out from the tree, they should move out an equal distance from the tree. Also the panel should work easily when worked by hand, but should not be sloppy.

Some panels should work back and



forth, front to rear, due to a slot in the panels that the fasteners slide back and forth in. If the saddle you are looking at has this sliding action, it should be smooth and even at the rear of each panel. If the panels are not even, that is a sign that repair may be necessary. This type of repair is not complicated if you know what you're doing. However, there are only a handful of independent saddle makers who understand paneled saddles and because of that, returning the saddle to the original maker is your best bet for quality repairs.

Next, set the saddle on the floor, on the horn only, and press the cantle down. Check for a broken tree as before, however, do not press the front of the panels on the floor. Most flex panel saddles are designed to give a panel life of over 15,000 miles and as such, the chance of having a panel that has exhausted its life is almost impossible. I have one such saddle that is twenty-five years old and is still in first class shape. At this point, check the fleece lining etc., just as you did for the regular treed saddle. However, be alert for any

feeling of a bulge in the panel/skirt, near the fasteners. This is a saddle that needs to be sent to the maker for repairs and do not, under any circumstance, purchase the saddle.

The flex panels on a flex panel saddle are not a big mystery, being made up of layers of leather, neoprene, foam, and delrin. Delrin is technically called polyoxymethylene. The basis for it was discovered by a German scientist in 1920. It was perfected and patented by the Dupont Chemical Company in 1956.

Although many unknowing sales people refer to the Delrin as a new space age material, it hardly qualifies as such. Delrin can be found in everything from guitar picks to wheel bearings. In a panel form, it has the ability to form, under pressure, to whatever it is lying on, then return to its original shape when the pressure is removed.

To properly check the fit of a flex panel saddle, it requires that the rider sit in the saddle. The panel shapes to the back of the mule when weight is applied to the seat of the saddle. Any person who says



Flex panel saddle with panels that are not even on the tree.

they have "taken a flex panel saddle apart, and they don't work," is imparting false information. Taking one apart has nothing to do with how the saddle works. The only way to tell if a flex panel saddle works is to ride it.

Now let's look at saddle construction methods that will help the saddle fit your mule a little better. These may be things you want to include or omit in your new or used saddle.

One of the very first things is a clear gullet, from the front of the saddle to the back of the saddle. By this, I mean no part of the saddle touches the spine of the mule anywhere along the backbone. There are a number of mules that have a spine that is slightly raised above the rest of their backs. Any part of the saddle that puts pressure on the spine is a potential source of damage to the vertebrae.

Deep bruising of the vertebrae will take many weeks to heal, and often times will heal with a permanent bump. This bump is easily damaged again by any pressure from the saddle. A young mule may not have a raised spine, however, as he ages, such a raised spine may develop. Keep in mind that poor fitting saddles can contribute to muscle atrophy that can add to a mule developing a rise to his spine.

Look at the gullet, from the front, and notice whether there is a channel, free of leather, fur or what have you, running from the front to the rear of the saddle. I have



No open gullet



Open gullet channel on a standard tree saddle

never seen a flex panel saddle that didn't have this clearance. However, I have seen more standard saddles without it than with it. If the custom maker does his job, it's possible to make a conventional mule bar saddle with the clearance necessary to leave the mule's spine pressure free.

The skirts, where they come together at the rear of the saddle can be a major contributor of spinal injury to a mule. The vast majority of custom saddle makers, will pull the corners of the skirts together at the back of the saddle, and make a fancy lace connection between the two. This lacing is the source of more sore backed mules than I can count.

Some saddles may not have the lacing, but will have a cantle jockey fitted down so tight against the skirts, they can't flex. This is just as bad as having them laced together. There appears to be only a few custom mule saddle makers that understand the necessity for a clear channel from the front of the saddle to the rear of the saddle, and the need for the skirt corners to flex where the skirts come together at the rear of a mule saddle.

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Bar angle has suddenly come into the mule saddle world, with the big buzz being 90-93 degree bars. As you look at the bars



Back of skirts should be free to flex



Back skirts laced together should be avoided on a mule saddle.



Cantle jockey installed so close to skirts, they interfere with the skirts' ability to flex at the rear corners.



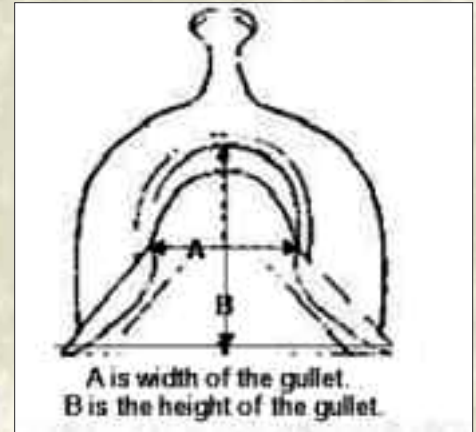
Rear of a flex panel saddle showing open construction of panels/skirts.

on a tree, you will see that they twist from about a 45-degree angle under the fork and flatten out as they move toward the cantle. Someone, I don't know who, suddenly decided that the bars at about the location of the cantle need to be in the 90-degree plus angle in order to fit a mule. What happens when you put that saddle on an 85-degree mule? They are out there you know!!

Gullet width is another matter of degrees, accompanied by width. Most bars at the front of the gullet will be an angle of about 45-degrees regardless of the width. Many years ago, long before the current group of mule clinicians came along, a mule training video came out wherein the instructor advocated the use of saddles with a six to six and a one half inch wide gullet. Other than that no other modifications were noted as being necessary to the proper fit of a saddle to a mule.

From there, gullet width recommendations moved to wider gullets, more or less flare to the front of the bars and every configuration you can imagine. Now they

seem to have come full circle and a large number of makers are again advocating a six and one half inch in gullet on mule saddles. I think the recommendations will continue to change again, with the passing of time.



Between the gullet width and the degree of angle to the bars, error on the side of wider rather than narrower. Even though it's not the best answer, it's easier to pad up, rather than trying to squeeze a mule up into a narrow gullet and steep bar angle. If you ride more than one mule, the flex panel saddles may be the best option going for you, as they will fit a wider range of backs for a given gullet width, than a saddle made with standard construction. If the standard tree saddle maker has a general mule bar, as opposed to a more specific design on the trees he offers, go with the more general mule bars and accompanying gullet width.

Not all, but a large number of well made flex panel saddles have gullet widths that are six, seven or eight inches in width. I



Excellent fit of a flex panel saddle on a mule. Note full length open gullet.

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have ridden a lot of different flex panel saddles over the last twenty years, pleasure riding, roping and leading other mules and horses. I have found the seven-inch gullets on flex panel saddles to be the most versatile fit on mules of any saddles I have ridden on them.

There is one style of bars that mule riders want to avoid, and that's Arizona bars. Arizona bars are a style of bar wherein the underside of the bar has no relief cutout for the stirrup leathers. This Arizona bars style can be found on Quarter Horse bars, gaited bars, mule bars, you name it. The issue here is that the stirrup leathers, which on many saddles are 16 to 18 ounce leather (which is quite thick), can push the skirts down against the mule's back a few inches behind the scapula and cause sores on the mule's back in that area. Arizona bars work much better on horses than mules.

On a new custom saddle you can specify that this type of bar not be used. Flex panel saddles, because of their construction, are not bothered by this issue. When looking at a used mule saddle, lift up the seat jockey and look where the stirrup leathers come out from under the tree. Look for a cutout relief at the bottom of the tree. If



Excellent example of a custom made wade tree with wood post horn, awaiting rawhide covering. Note stirrup leather relief on the bottom of the tree.

you don't see the relief, you should do more shopping.

Rigging position is a major concern for mule riders. Here is a rule of thumb you can take to the bank when it comes to saddle riggings. The further back the rigging is installed on the saddle, the further forward the saddle will sit on the mule's back. The further forward the rigging is placed on the saddle, the further back the saddle will sit on the mule. The reason for this is that the mule has a heart girth area, as do horses or "sweet spot" (if you want to call it that) a few inches behind the mules

elbow) where the girth is going to move to as the mule moves out. Let's say we have a saddle rigged with a center fire rigging, which is the rigging set the farthest back on the saddle that we can make. As the cinch moves to the heart girth area, it will move the saddle forward. The full rigging position, which is the farthest forward normal rigging, will cause the saddle to move back as the mule moves.

Check for the rigging position on the saddle by looking at the side of the saddle. If the rigging ring is centered on the side of the fork of the saddle (usually in line with the center of the horn) it is most likely a full rigged saddle. A rigging aligned with the center of the seat is a center fire rigging. Cut that distance by little more than half and you have a three-quarter rigging. Cut that distance in half between the full and three-quarter position and you have the seven-eighths position. You will find the seven-eighths position to be the most user friendly rigging position for mules.

Flex panel saddles, and a few others, offer an adjustable rigging option that you can change in seconds, and allows the rider to move the rigging between several different positions. I have found this to be a great



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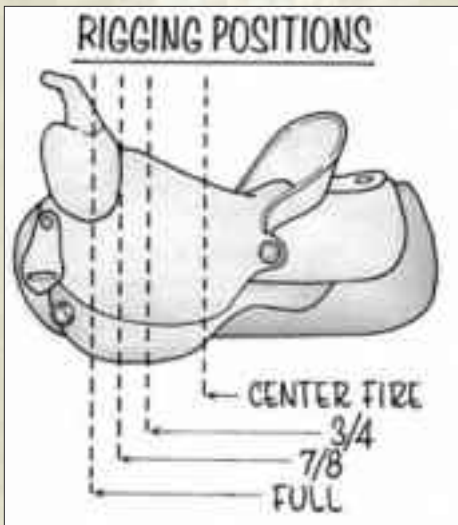
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help in fitting a saddle to a mule and it's especially handy if you ride more than one mule.

If you have located a prospective purchase, and especially if it's a used saddle, the seller should have no problem letting you try the saddle on your mule. A deposit may of course be required. If the saddle is new, the seller may or may not allow you to try the saddle on your mule. We have a tendency in the saddle business to think that one, ten-minute ride on a new saddle automatically makes the saddle a used saddle. Nothing could be farther from the



Four position adjustable rigging on flex panel saddle.

truth. When you go to a clothing store and try on a new pair of boots and walk around the store for ten minutes, and the boots don't fit, the store doesn't put those boots in the used bin. The same holds true for a saddle fitting. One thing is certain; a saddle will feel a whole lot different to you on your mule than sitting in it on a saddle stand.

In this article and in part one (*see Buying a Used Mule Saddle, Part One, Western Mule Magazine, February 2010*), I have tried, to give you a few easily observed pointers in picking out a mule saddle. There are other construction issues that a buyer could certainly use in making a decision to buy a saddle. However, there are complete books written on the subject and a lot more magazine space would be needed to list them all.

We have many great saddle makers in this country today, turning out some really great saddles. Do your homework, shop carefully, and make informed decisions based on that preparation and you can't go wrong.

To contact Terry Wagner for information on this article or prior articles, e-mail: threebellsmares@yahoo.com

We're sorry, in the January 2010 Issue, we needed to include contact information for Hilltop Hideaway, (Terry Wagner did an article on them) for anyone that might be interested in visiting it.

Please find that information below.

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