



WHICH IS BEST IN SADDLE PANELS? WOOL, FOAM, OR AIR



AIR PANELS

Saddler's Note: *When air panels first came out on the market, there was a lot of buzz and enthusiasm which lasted for a couple of years of trial. Many saddles were converted to air at a dear price and later reconverted back to wool.*

Although a clever and interesting alternative they have failed to replace wool as the premium material for a variety of reasons.

- Air is unstable and tends to expand and contract as temperatures change.
- There have been many problems with leaking valves leaving the rider with a "flat" before a big competition. Unlike wool you can't just compensate with a little more padding to get you through.
- As the rider's weight goes forward the air tends to be forced in the opposite direction leaving the back unprotected.
- If there is too little air pressure, the horse's back may be exposed to the tree, and if there is too much pressure, the saddle often rocks on the horse's back.
- A Swiss study indicated that some riders reported a lack of communication and effectiveness via their riding aids when riding on air panels.

WOOL FLOCKED PANELS

- Wool has always been the saddlers choice for flocking panels.
- Wool flocked panels are not assembly line made with the one size fits all attempt in mind.
- Wool is extremely comfortable on the horse's back and disperses the riders weight over a

broader surface area, assuming the correct design and fit of the saddle.

- Because wool flock consists of long individual strands it can easily conform to the polymorphous shapes of the horse's back. Foam, regardless of how soft it may feel, does not compare to wool's ability to conform. Wool can be easily adjusted to compensate for asymmetry in the horse's conformation.
- Wool can be completely replaced in older saddles for relatively little cost.
- Wool provides stable support for the rider's weight.
- There are no sharp edges.

CRITICISM OF WOOL

An often-heard criticism of wool by manufacturers who use foam panels is that wool knots up. I rarely find knots in wool panels unless it was improperly flocked by a novice. If there are knots, they can easily be removed and replaced with fresh wool.

Typically wool only knots when it is being removed from the panels.

Note: Wool panels alone do not guarantee comfort for the horse and cannot compensate for a poorly designed or fitted saddle.

The bad news is that wool panels need to be topped off or adjusted periodically to compensate for compression or changes in the horse's back, due to a variety of reasons including diet, training, age, season, or changes in the horses back, to name a few.

The Good News is that they easily can be!

FOAM PRE-FORMED PANELS

Saddler's Note: *Pre-formed foam panels are made in molds and designed for more of an assembly line production process geared toward speed and cost reduction.*

- The problem is that horses' backs are not pre-formed to match the panels.
- Foam does not conform to the polymorphous shapes of horses backs.
- Foam cannot be adjusted to compensate for asymmetry.
- Foam panels very often bridge in the middle even when the saddle appears to be balanced.
- Soft foam panels collapse and may create extreme pressure on the horse's back and withers, causing soreness.
- Harder foam panels often have sharp edges which bear most of the weight instead of distributing the weight over a broad surface area.
- Many foam panels are attached at the front with a covered nail which can dig into the back.
- They must be completely replaced when they collapse.

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