

## Choosing The Correct Girth Should Be A Cinch! By Joanna Robson, DVM, CVSMT, CMP, CVA, SFT

Choosing a correctly fitting saddle is hard enough, but there are also important things to know about choosing the correct girth! That's right – it's not as easy as going to the tack store and grabbing a girth that matches your saddle the best, or that has the best price tag. The correct girth can actually make a significant impact on your horse's performance!



This dressage girth is much too short. The buckles will impinge on the horse's elbow and triceps muscles.

When the saddle is in the proper position behind the shoulder, the girth sits over the ribcage and centers on the sternum. Studies have shown that a girth fastened too tightly can impinge on the expandability of the horse's ribcage; though respiration is not usually affected, it can be very

uncomfortable for the horse!

The traditional hunter-jumper girth consists of a shaped leather strap with elastic at one end, and either a split-end or solid end on the opposite side. The body of the girth is either an overlay type, or the Atherstone style, which has a thin piece of leather running down the centerline. The Atherstone style is also known as a "knife-edge" due to the fact that the smaller reinforcing leather strip is really what carries the pressure upon tightening the girth. This smaller piece of leather can cut into the horse, and these girths should not be used. An overlay girth does a better job of distributing the pressure throughout the body of the girth, but the ends of any girth should both be elastic.



Knife-edge girths (left) hanging next to an overlay girth (right).



Single-elastic, knife-edge girth.

Single elastic girths only have "give" at one end. Thus, if your horse has one shoulder bigger than the other (as most of them do) the saddle is already slipping to the side of least resistance, and now your girth only allows for give at one end, further off-balancing your equipment. One remedy for this is to turn your girth around, and use the elastic on the opposite side; that is, of course, until

you can get a double-elastic girth. A double elastic girth should be fastened on the same billet hole on both sides of the saddle in order to equalize the pressure over the sternum and chest.



Dressage girths are shorter due to the dressage saddle billets being longer. This design allows freedom of the rider's leg without bulk under the flap. Freedom of the horse's legs, however, is also imperative. If the dressage girth is too small, the buckles will be directly behind your horse's elbow, which can cause sores and galling, and will also restrict range of motion – not desirable in a dressage horse! A properly fitting dressage girth should have 2-3 holes left from the top of the billets when done up, and the buckles should sit well above the horse's elbows so as not

to restrict range of motion or cause pinching. As with the hunter-jumper girths, the dressage girths should also be double-elastic, and not have a knife-edge leather as an overlay.

There are many materials besides leather available on the market for girths. Leather is certainly most common, and neoprene is easily washable, but can cause skin irritation due to sweat build-up. Cotton string or mohair is more commonly seen in Western cinches, but is still available in English girths.



Many new girths on the market have double-elastic, wide overlay, fleece linings, belly rings to attach training equipment, or belly guards to protect from grass caulks. Remember, when choosing your girth, more expensive doesn't always mean it's a better product. Look for the basics: soft material, double ended elastic, and the correct size, to maximize your horse's comfort and performance.



Expensive isn't always the best. This is a \$280 girth – elastic at only one end.