

# Half-pad use may benefit horses under well-fitted saddles

Research into the effects of padding on horses led to results unexpected by the team involved

By ELEANOR JONES

USING some types of half-pad under a correctly fitted saddle may have benefits for the horse, a study has found – but use should be discussed with a qualified fitter.

Russell MacKechnie-Guire, Mark Fisher and Thilo Pfau looked at pads made of gel, wool and medical-grade, closed-cell foam, under saddles fitted to industry guidelines.

Dr MacKechnie-Guire, of Centaur Biomechanics, said the first question was what effect the pads have in a dynamic situation.

“A lot of people have saddles fitted, then put a pad underneath,” he told *H&H*. “Our hypothesis was that it might create more pressure, because if the saddle hasn’t been fitted with a half-pad, it might become tighter underneath with one.”

## COMMONLY USED

THE three types of pad investigated are all commonly available and were the most popular choices cited in a previous survey of more than 1,000 riders, of whom 98% used a half-pad.

The study involved 12 dressage horses and their riders. Each horse’s soundness was confirmed and its saddle fit checked by Society of Master Saddlers (SMS) qualified fitters, then it was ridden with each pad.

The researchers used pressure-mapping and gait analysis technology to determine the



A wool or foam half-pad could benefit some horses

effects of each type of half-pad.

Dr MacKechnie-Guire said they found no change in limb movement, so the pressures recorded were solely a result of the change in half-pad.

“In trot and canter, we found the gel pad resulted in significantly higher pressure in

seam or ridge on gel pads makes them displace downwards in movement, increasing pressure.

By contrast, when the wool and foam pads – which had central spines – were used, the team recorded reduced pressure in the rear region of the saddle.

“This could be advantageous

*“You have to listen to the horse and the rider”*

MARK FISHER

the front of the saddle,” he said. “We measured saddle pressure in four regions; left and right, front and back, and it was higher, in the gel pad, on both sides at the front.

“The increase was localised at the base of the withers, in the region that corresponds to the narrowest part of the saddle. It’s an area we know contributes to back function and muscle activity, so high pressure there is not ideal.”

Dr MacKechnie-Guire said the team believes the lack of a central

for dampening the forces of the rider during locomotion,” Dr MacKechnie-Guire said, adding that this could be beneficial in riding schools, for example, as less balanced riders could create asymmetric force.

“But it could also help in general, for helping with back comfort,” he said. “So there could be an advantage in putting a foam or wool pad under a correctly fitted saddle, which is not what we had thought.”

Dr MacKechnie-Guire added the caveat that half-pad use should be discussed with a qualified fitter in advance, as if a saddle is narrow in front, for example, using a pad could increase pressure.

“We’re definitely not saying ‘go and buy a pad now’ or to use one to change saddle fit,” he said. “But it’s something to discuss with your fitter, because it could be beneficial to the horse.”

SMS fitter Mr Fisher, who assesses and lectures for the society, told *H&H* the study showed there are no right or wrong answers.

“We have to listen to the horse and rider, and see what’s happening dynamically,” he said.

“You can’t say to everyone: ‘You need to use a sheepskin or foam pad’; it’s individual.”

Mr Fisher said like many studies, this one threw up more questions so further work is under way on investigating the products themselves and looking into factors such as ambient temperature, and what effect this might have.

“The temperature seemed to have an effect on the gel particularly,” he said.

Mr Fisher agreed that taking advice from a fitter is key.

“You can pop a half-pad on and many horses seem to appreciate it, but we need to ensure the saddle is fitted and balanced with that set-up,” he said. “When we’re fitting a saddle, it’s our job to ask what the rider wants to use underneath. If they want to use a half-pad, is that for stability, shock absorbing or protecting the horse, as the three do slightly different things.

“The more intelligence and information we get, the better we are at answering the questions, but it takes long, expensive studies to get the answers. These are about horse welfare and performance, so it’s important the results are distributed.”

## PEOPLE IN THE NEWS



Jockey **Hollie Doyle** has been named the 2020 *Sunday Times* Sportswoman of the Year, and

has also been shortlisted for the BBC Sports Personality of the



Eventer **Wills Oakden** and his wife Stephanie welcomed their first child, a daughter, on 21

November. The couple said they were “absolutely delighted” to



German multiple gold medal-winning eventer **Michael Jung** got engaged to equine

physiotherapist Faye Füllgräbe on 27 November. Michael shared the