

Know Model Horse Performance:

Three English Saddle Types: Close Contact, All Purpose and Dressage

by Sarah Tregay



Leather close contact/jumping saddle without kneepads. Stirrup leathers are adjusted for over fences. Note that the pad is too large. A riser pad made of foam makes the seat level instead of downhill.

A leather all-purpose saddle. Stirrup leathers are adjusted for working on the flat. Both photos 1 and 2 have the same leather girth with elastic ends. The saddle pad is the same as photo on the left, although it fits the all-purpose. A riser pad made of foam makes the seat level instead of downhill.

A Wintec (synthetic) dressage saddle and girth. Stirrup leathers are adjusted for dressage. Note that there isn't enough excess stirrup leather to reach the keeper.

English saddles have a tendency to look alike, especially when scaled down to fit mini model horses. The three that are most easily confused are the close contact or jumping saddle, the all-purpose or eventing saddle, and the dressage saddle. When purchasing or making a saddle for your model, keep an eye on the shape of the seat, the flap length, the stirrup leathers, and the girth.

Close Contact

Close contact saddles are used for hunt seat events such as hunt seat equitation, hunter under saddle, fox hunting, and both hunters and jumpers. These saddles accommodate a bent knee, shorter stirrup leathers and a rider in a half-seat or two-point position.

Sometimes called a "forward seat" saddle, the close contact saddle's flaps are rounded, shorter and more forward than a dressage saddle. The seat is flat as opposed to deep but does have a convex shape.

Most, if not all, close contact saddles are made with three short billets and a long girth with two buckles. Close contact saddles are often brown, some with padded knee flaps.



This mini saddle has too short panels that are too forward.



This is the same mini-scale, all-purpose saddle with in-proportion panels. Note that the saddle isn't finished and is missing excess leathers/keepers.

Common Close Contact Saddle Problems for Model Horses

- Yes, the flaps are shorter. No, they are not short like a western saddle with the stirrups cut off. The rider's knee needs room to rest against the saddle.
- The stirrup leathers are shorter, but not too short. The stirrups will fall below the saddle flaps and touch the girth. If the rider is a small child, the saddle will be tiny and the stirrups may fall on the saddle flaps (but be sure to note this on your entry).
- Also be sure that the stirrup leathers aren't too long. Yes, you may have a tall rider, but a tall rider will also have a proportionate saddle with room for their knees on the flaps and their bottom in the seat.
- Yes, the seat is behind the flaps. No, the seat does not stick out eight inches behind the rider, nor does it rest on the horse's hips. (The rider will want about four fingers of space from their bottom to the cantle.)
- Yes, the seat is flatter, but not flat. It has a slightly convex shape.
- Yes, the seat is forward, but it doesn't sit high on the withers and have a downhill appearance. Instead, the saddle will appear flat and level.
- Stirrup irons that are too large or small for the rider's feet. Women and children tend to ride in smaller irons than men. The stirrups pictured are 4.25 inches across. They fit a women's size 7 shoe.
- A shaped pad that is too large for the saddle. It may show more in the girth area that it does in front or behind. Hunt seat riders should appear very tidy.
- Stirrup leathers are attached too far forward or too far back. Or, when viewed from above, the right and left stirrup leather come out of different places on the tree.



RiderDollTest.jpg: A quick way to test your saddles is to put a rider doll in them. See how her bottom is on the seat without too much excess (nor is it too tight). Her knee is also on the panel and not below it. The stirrup leathers, although okay, are a little short for the doll. The stirrups are a good size.

All Purpose

Often favored by amateur-owners in real horse arenas and sometimes scoffed as a 'no-purpose saddle' by avid riders, these saddles are very useful in the model horse ring. Consider having one of these in your tack box for trail, training level dressage, small to medium jumps, cross-country, and English pleasure classes.

Although real-horse saddle makers will differentiate between an all-purpose and an eventing saddle, the differences in the model horse world are insignificant.

An all-purpose or eventing saddle will have a deeper seat, and a forward, but longer, flap. Look for three billets and a long girth with two buckles. Look for a convex seat that appears level.

All-purpose saddles, especially in the smaller scales, may have the same problems as close contact saddles.

Dressage

Deep seated and straight-flapped, the dressage saddle is easier to spot. In these saddles, the rider sits vertically with a long leg. Both the stirrup and flap length are longer because the rider's knee is not bent as much. The pommel is a bit higher and the deepest point of the saddle's seat more forward, allowing the longer leg position. Some designs have padding in front of the knee to aid the rider's position.

Most dressage saddles are black and will have two long billets and a short girth that buckles near the horse's elbow. Dressage riders often ride with a squarish pad instead of a shaped one.

Common Dressage Saddle Problems for Model Horses

- Short stirrup leathers instead of long ones (which would indicate that the rider is in the wrong position).
- A flat seat instead of a deep one.
- Dressage saddles can sometimes appear to be too small for the horse or look childlike. A very small dressage saddle (with small irons) on a big warmblood stallion can be confusing for the judge because a child would not ride that horse.
- Three short billets and a long girth (two billets and short girth is more correct and much more common).



*Sarah enjoys showing customized stablemates. On occasion she gets out the tweezers to tack them up and show performance. She is the author of a coloring book **Let's Go to the Model Horse Show** (available on Amazon.com).*

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