



Benefits of riding in a Treeless Saddle...

Having worked as an equine physiotherapist for many years, Dianne sees many horses with sore backs. 9 times out of 10 this is related to poor saddle fit. Treeless saddles totally eliminate this problem when used correctly.

Horses' back muscles are dynamic; contracting and relaxing with each and every stride taken. Why put a rigid treed saddle, that has no movement or give in it whatsoever, on a horse's back that is constantly moving? Treeless saddles flex and move in all directions making them extremely comfortable for horse and rider. They will fit pretty much every horse in your paddock and they are more affordable than you might think.

Dianne currently rides in a Missoula Western Treeless Saddle and a Freeform Liberty on a wide backed little Quarter horse x Appaloosa but is also able to use these same saddles on her high withered Trakehner x Thoroughbred with no problems whatsoever! In some cases adjustments may need to be made to the saddle pad inserts to accommodate extremely high withers. However the new Freeform HW (High Wither) Treeless Saddle range now virtually eliminates the need for this.

The saddles are made from several layers of leather, foam, synthetic fur and other shock absorbing materials. As a result the saddle moulds softly around your horse's body and follows every movement without restriction. The horse's stride lengthens and the movement of the shoulders and back is free and more powerful as the horse moves forward with greater confidence, ease and relaxation. The rider sits nicely 'on' and not above the horse, gaining a very close contact and better connection with the horse. Balance, harmony and improved comfort for the horse and rider are the most obvious advantages for the rider going treeless.

Dianne's personal experience...

"Back in 2005 after purchasing my 2nd treeless saddle, a Freeform SB All Purpose (there were no dressage models available then), which I happily rode in for several months doing arena work, bush riding and HRCAV rallies and comps, I decided to have one more ride in my treed dressage saddle before selling it. This was a gorgeous looking traditional dressage saddle which had been fitted by a reputable saddle retailer, to my Trak cross; Phoenix, only 8 months previously.

I climbed on and headed for the arena for what I thought would be a nice little work out...only to find that Phoenix had suddenly developed a strange head tossing behaviour which had never presented itself before. At first I thought it might have been the bit he was resenting; I'd been riding him quite a bit in the bush with just a rope halter, but thought to myself; he'll get over it and I'll just 'ride him through it'.

As we moved up into a trot, Phoenix displayed another unusual activity; instead of striding out nicely like he normally he does, he was shuffling around the arena like a choppy little pony! Again, I thought it must be the bit. "Well he's just going to have to deal with it and get over it!" I thought to myself, so gave him a bit of a 'g' on with my legs and fully relaxed my contact with the bit.

WELL! To my shock and surprise, Phoenix threw in a mongormous handstand which, if it wasn't for him keeping his neck up, I would surely have met with a sudden and horrific case of arena fence impalement!

So after rearranging myself and waiting for my heart rate to return to normal, I sat there in my gleaming treed saddle scratching my head, wondering what was upsetting him so much. Then it suddenly dawned on me, (Phoenix by this stage must have thought I was a bit slow on the uptake no doubt!) – It's the darn saddle!!!

So off we went back the barn to change back over to my Freeform. I climbed back on and headed for the arena at a trot, but not just any trot; Phoenix was doing his first extended trot ever! We glided around the arena like his hooves weren't even touching the surface. It was the most amazing movement Phoenix had ever displayed that I didn't want it to end; his contact on the bit was lovely and soft, his balance amazing and the tempo and rhythm of his stride was dressage test perfect! By pulling out these super flash moves, he was obviously trying to make the message crystal clear;

"I DON'T LIKE TREED SADDLES ANYMORE!"

So be warned, once you go treeless, some horses will never go back! To be fair, Phoenix is not one for putting up with pain and suffering in silence about *anything*, so his reaction is probably a bit on the extreme side but it does make me wonder about all those horses out there that *do* suffer in silence. Most are such good little ponies for their owners that they never misbehave or react as violently as Phoenix did to pain."

Important things to know...

The saddles must only be used with the therapeutic saddle pads. These have foam or rubber inserts in them which sit either side of the horse's spine. Extra inserts can be inserted for high withered horses or for heavier riders. For riders over 75 kilos, double inserts are required. However the rider weight limit for the Barefoot Treeless Saddles is 100 kilos and about 110 kilos for the Freeform's (with correct inserts).

History and interesting things to know...

Treeless saddles have been around for many years now but have only really come into their own in recent years. They are extremely popular amongst endurance riders, dressage riders and trail riders. The WA Police Department have their entire mounted police officers riding in the Freeform saddles. They said it was the only saddle they could happily sit in all day and were very pleased to find that their horses were also comfortable day after day.

The Barefoot Treeless Saddle was designed by a German Equine Physiotherapist; Sabine Ullmann with scientific knowledge and the horses' welfare in mind. Sabine studied the horses' anatomy in motion and spent many years fixing saddle related back problems, aches and pains and resulting behaviour problems. Sabine became inspired by Italian treeless saddle designs and decided to use her knowledge to create her own models. She is now manufacturing very affordable quality saddles that are therapeutic for the horse and comfortable for the rider. The Barefoot saddles are unbeatable value for money and they are the most friendly and best selling treeless saddles in Australia and the rest of the world.

Technical things to know and what to expect...

The Barefoot models are made from 'grippy' Nubuck leather and the Freeform is made from gorgeous soft Italian leather or suede. The stirrup leathers hang directly from a 'D' ring underneath the seat in both models, so because of this the use of safety stirrups is highly recommended.

The Barefoot models give you the feeling of riding bareback but the added security of a pommel, cantle and stirrups. The pommel is inter-changeable so if you have an extremely wide or narrow withered horse, this can be accommodated. Alternatively the pommel insert can be removed all together and replaced with cotton wool balls or wool fleece or the [NEW Barefoot Soft Pommel insert \(\\$30 AU\)](#) if preferred. This way the saddle will fit all your horses with no need to change pommel inserts ever again.

The Freeform feels more like a traditional treed saddle to the rider but is much kinder to your behind! It has a twist in the seat similar to treed saddles and again, the security is amazing. The position from where the stirrups attach, is totally adjustable; move forward for a jumping seat positioning or backward for a classical dressage position. The Freeform AP can be used for jumping up to 1.2 metres.

The soft structure and flexibility of both of these saddles enables the horse to move without losing its natural grace, allowing full range of movement while carrying the rider in the correct position. The horse's back can arch and thus enhanced vertical/lateral movement of the thoracic vertebral column results. The rider is placed directly behind the horse's wither; avoiding pressure beyond the 14th thoracic vertebrae but still allowing full range of movement of the shoulder blades. As a result, the rider's weight is carried over the strongest part of the horse's spine without causing pain, discomfort or damage to the horse's body.

The area on a horse's back best equipped to carry a rider comfortably is between the 9th and 13th thoracic vertebrae. This area is in fact much smaller than most of us realise. The further we move away from the horse's centre of gravity, the more likely it is that soundness issues will occur. The Barefoot and Freeform saddles wrap the rider's weight around the horse's centre of gravity perfectly. If you look at your buttocks and upper thighs and compare the size of that area with the panels of a treed saddle you might find that the treeless rider actually distributes his/her weight over a larger area than the rider in a conventional saddle.

The BAREFOOT and FREEFORM saddles can be flexed in all directions. They are an easy fit and it is likely that one saddle will fit all your horses. A saddle fitting questionnaire is available on request, just [email us](#) and we will be able to tell you if the saddle will fit you and your horses as is or if we need to make adjustments.

The Barefoot saddles are made from vegetable-tanned Nubuck leather which is open-pored. This leather moulds correctly to the shape of the horse's back. The raised front and rear of the saddle are filled and stabilized with a piece of fibreglass (pommel) and foam (cantle). The pieces are removable in order to completely avoid undue pressure on any horses with extremely broad withers or with an overly sensitive loin area. Due to the fibreglass and the positioning of the rider close to the horse, the saddle achieves a very secure hold on the horse's back.

The Freeform saddle is an anatomically shaped one piece foam mould covered by Italian leather and has a flexible aluminium arch in the front of the detachable seat to create wither clearance. These saddles also totally adjust to the shape of any given horse while providing good stability on the horse's back.

Provided you have girthed up firmly as recommended the saddles do not slip on horses that tend to be rounded and don't have prominent withers. We find the HAF

and Christ pad give the most lateral stability on round low withered horses under our saddles. Despite this, we still recommend that a mounting aid is used whenever possible.

Please note: mounting aids are just as important with a conventional saddle if not more so. The slower you mount and the heavier you are the more it hurts your horse when you mount from the ground.

The seat bones of the rider are naturally positioned to the left and right of the horse's spine and not on top. Additionally, the cushioned saddle sitting area plus the therapeutic saddle pad protect both horse and rider from pressure points. Treeless saddles have been used by endurance riders for close to 20 years in Europe and the US, so you can trust that it is in fact a myth that we need lots of clearance over the horse's spine, as long as there is no direct pressure on the dorsal processes, no harm is done. Thermal imaging studies of both saddle brands have shown that there is no pressure directly on the spine provided they are used as recommended. The Barefoot saddles also give excellent wither clearance and are therefore also recommended for very high withered horses in combination with our Physiopads. Yes, some horses are very sensitive and / or have missing top line; therefore we provide a number of options when it comes to padding under the saddle. Please see the [saddle pad](#) page for further info.

In Summary...

The experience of sitting in a BAREFOOT saddle is similar to bareback riding, only more comfortable and safer in that the rider is supported by the front and rear raised parts of the saddle and fenders or stirrup leathers are usually attached, but they are removable.

The FREEFORM saddle feels more like a conventional saddle to the rider but it provides a better contact and all the benefits of a treeless saddle. This saddle has a twist like any conventional English saddle and therefore the adjustment for the rider is minimal. In this saddle you will not sit as wide as in a Barefoot which makes it also suitable for riders with impaired hip joints. The adjustable stirrup points enable the rider to set up the stirrups perfectly to suit their individual pelvic anatomy.

The BAREFOOT and FREEFORM saddles are suitable for most types of riding. A definite advantage of these saddles is that no specialist input is required for a fitting because the saddle fits almost every horse's back, resulting in no pressure points. We have worked out a questionnaire; (return to the saddles page and you'll find a link to this questionnaire at the bottom of the page), which provides us with sufficient information to fit a saddle perfectly to you and your horse. We often ask for two additional photos; one side on showing the whole horse close up and one

photo taken from behind the horses rump showing the withers, shoulders and back from above.

Treeless riding is the most comfortable way to be on a horse, more comfy than riding bareback and once you have ridden in one for a while you will be surprised how uncomfortable, hard and rigid your former favourite traditional saddle now feels.

Are there restrictions to the use of the saddles and accessories?

1. A treeless saddle should only be used with a special additional pressure-absorbing underlay at all times. This underlay needs to have top quality shock absorption, a contoured shape allowing for the horses wither, it needs to create a channel over the spine and it has to be made from a breathing skin friendly material. Generally the policy is that we will not sell a saddle on its own unless you already own such a pad. **The harder you work your horse the better the padding needs to be**, therefore we offer top of the range therapeutic saddle pads and a variety of inserts for different applications. If other dealers claim you do not need one of those pads with a treeless saddle they prove via that statement that they have no clue about treeless saddles and that they are not qualified to advise you on this matter.

2. Riders weighing over 75 kg and all endurance riders will require an additional layer of padding in the Grandeur pads. The use of the Barefoot Physio pad or a double-padded HAF or Skito pad are also recommended for heavier riders or people who spend long hours in the saddle. Pleasure riders up to 100 kg's can ride in the Barefoot saddles with the correct pad, the weight limit for the Freeform is around 110kg's. **We recommend the Cheyenne and Cherokee saddle for light & middleweight weight endurance riders only**, the Freeform is recommended for endurance riders up to 90kg.

3. The Barefoot saddles are not suitable for show jumping or cross country, occasional jumping up to a metre is fine, please beware of the pommel or horn when you do. In the Freeform you can jump higher and it is due to its shape and the adjustable stirrup attachment the more suitable saddle for people who do want to jump regularly.

4. We do not have a narrow twist with the Barefoot saddles therefore you are sitting as wide as your horse really is. Rule of thumb is, if you are comfortable on your horse riding bareback you will be comfortable in the saddle. This does not apply to the Freeform which does have a narrower twist.

5. Stock saddle riders can find the different stirrup positioning of the Barefoot saddles an adjustment, the saddle does not encourage you to have your legs in front

of you. It promotes a balanced upright seat. Once you adjust to this different way of riding you never look back and your horse will thank you for it.

6. Beginner riders would be well advised to take riding lessons with a good instructor; it is simply fairer on the horse and a lot safer for the rider. Dressage is the foundation to any style of riding, so it is the best place to start. The treeless saddles can be a wonderful training aid in learning a very good seat and to teach you sensitivity to your horse's movement. You will have a definite advantage in these saddles due to the close contact and you will therefore learn faster than in a treed saddle. You are not held in a position but will learn to carry your own bodyweight in a balanced way which your present and future horses will appreciate.

I ride endurance / go on long trail rides / spend long hours mustering - is there anything I need to know? A must read for the endurance rider...

The Barefoot Cheyenne, Barefoot Cherokee and the Freeform saddles are widely used for long hours in the saddle over tough terrain. Both brands of saddles have proven themselves amongst competitive endurance riders here and overseas. Both brands of saddles have been used by riders in the Tom Quilty Cup, the Shazadah, the NSW, Vic, W.A., Tassie and Qld State Championships, the US Tevis Cup and many other rides. The Freeform was used by the 2007 heavyweight winner of the US Tevis Cup and 5 riders amongst the first 10 over the line in 2009 were also riding in a Freeform. Yes here in Australia we had winners of rides and numerous 'best conditioned horse' too.

For endurance and CTR riders we recommend to invest in our Physio or Skito pad for high withered horses or the double padded HAF pad for broader horses with low to medium size withers. Yes you can also use the standard Grandeur pad but it would be best to use a d-Lua Park pad underneath. The foam inserts of the Grandeur pads will need to be checked for compression regularly and replacements need to be ordered if the foam is visibly squashed anywhere. Most competitive riders own more than one therapeutic saddle pad and alternate those between legs on the rides. Many endurance riders use d-Lua Park wool pad or a sheepskin under our therapeutic pads with great results. Besides needing additional layers of padding or a superior saddle pad, the endurance rider using a Barefoot saddle needs to give the horse intervals with very little or no weight in the stirrups for at least 10 minutes of every hour. This can be done in a walk or canter with your buttocks in the saddle or while you lead your horse. The weight shift of the rider allows circulation to return to areas on the horse's back under potential stress from two pointing. These changes of rider position are beneficial to your horse no matter what saddle you are using, think of shifting a backpack while hiking, yep that feels good. Endurance riders who

stick to these few rules have a wonderful and trouble free time and usually go with straight A's for back condition through the vet checks, yes also on 160km rides.

If you are a novice to horse riding please make sure you ride with enough padding and that you work on your balance. An unbalanced riding position due to untrained rider muscles or if you ride with more weight in one stirrup than the other can make horses very sore no matter what saddle you use. It is the opinion of the author that riders need to be extremely 'riding fit' and have a very good and balanced seat before they attempt any endurance rides. It is just not fair on the horses to ask top athletic performance if you cannot assist the horse to achieve and maintain it. Schooling of the endurance horse to get off the forehand and to relax the back muscles while under saddle is essential to keeping your horse sound - no matter what saddle you use. You can tell who is riding their horse properly by the end of the endurance season, the horses who lose all top line instead of building it while doing massive amounts of work are not ridden in a competent way. Those riders would be well advised to get some help regarding proper training of horses under saddle and on the ground. No saddle will be able to prevent damage to the horses back if an endurance horse is not ridden properly, you create less damage with a treeless saddle but we still strongly encourage you to work on your own riding and training skills.

The Freeform saddle has superior shock absorption and weight distribution, breaks from two pointing are still recommended. The Freeform is suitable for light, middle and heavy weight riders. Generally we recommend the Cheyenne and Cherokee saddle for light weight and middleweight endurance riders only, the Freeform is recommended for endurance riders up to 90kg.

Everything is carried on my back!

(By horse physiology specialist S. Ullmann)

Good riding technique as well as sound training of the horse is extremely important for the horse's back. Here, the actual type of riding involved is irrelevant while the anatomical and physiological requirements of the horse are much more significant. In this context, the importance of using the correct equipment, especially choosing the right kind of saddle, cannot be emphasized enough.

The thoracic section of the horse's vertebral column is not created naturally for carrying the weight of the rider. The aim of schooling must therefore be to build up the horse's muscles so that it is able to carry our weight without suffering injury.

A horse only becomes a true riding horse when it has learnt to lift its back under saddle. If this motion sequence is hindered by a saddle that sits wrongly and is rigid

or by the rider sitting too far back in the saddle (beyond T14), the horse cannot move its back properly. A rider leaning forward will discourage engagement of the hindquarters while rider's leaning behind the vertical, riding in a 'chair seat' create a 'dead weight' on their horse's backs. The BAREFOOT saddles encourage the rider to sit straight which makes it easier for the horse to engage the abdominal muscles and to bring the hindquarters under. This is the best possible scenario to build and maintain the muscles needed to carry the rider's weight without compromising soundness.

The BAREFOOT and Freeform saddle positions the rider over the horse's centre of gravity, thoracic vertebrae 9-13. This creates the optimum horse welfare conditions for riding. However, the BAREFOOT and FREEFORM saddles cannot replace correct riding technique and schooling!

To read more about how the Barefoot saddles are constructed, return to the [Barefoot Saddle](#) page and click on the VPS link.