

HOW Shims Work:



by Linda Parelli

1. Shims give the horse room to move his body.

A Horse's back and saddle are not a perfect match when the horse is in motion. So, in order to prevent the saddle from restricting, the saddle needs to be too big for the horse. Plus, it needs to be moved back behind the actively moving shoulder blades. This is the opposite of how most saddles are designed and positioned on a horse. How interesting!

The shims would support the front of the saddle, keeping the saddle clear of the withers and shoulders. This also helps the rider get on their Balance Point.

2. Shims make up for weak and wasted muscles.

Many horses have very poor muscle development on their backs. Horses that move with their head in the air and hollow out their backs, or travel 'on the forehand' and drag themselves along with their front legs (instead of pushing with their hind legs) usually have wasted muscle on their topline, and overdeveloped muscles on their underline.

Just by looking at the muscling of a horse, you can tell what parts of his body he doesn't use, plus what he overuses to compensate. A well-muscled horse should be curvy and strong over his topline. This is essential for him to carry a rider and maintain his physical health and strength.

Shims need to be used to compensate for poor muscles. Without shims, the saddle pushes down further into the weak areas and worsens the problem. Many saddles actually weaken a horse's back, because they're too narrow and they pinch the shoulders and spine. This causes the horse to hollow out because the bars are generally shaped to fit a stationary back.

3. Shims level a 'downhill' horse.

Horses that are heavy on the forehand tend to have a 'downhill' posture: where the withers are lower than the hips. When you look at these horses, they sometimes appear to have short front legs, which is not really the case. What's happened is that the chest muscles are overdeveloped and make the chest look lower. The hind legs straighten out and lose their spring-like shape, which makes them longer from hip to heel. A horse's front legs are not well-designed for bearing weight, but the hind legs are. This is where

the horse's power is.

When you shim the saddle up so it shifts the rider's weight to the hindquarters, the horse will not be trapped and will be able to take the weight off the front end. This makes the riding experience, for both horse and rider, SO much better because the horse can use his hind end and the rider can sit back on their Balance Point>#Note: If the horse is downhill because he's young and still growing, you should still use shims to compensate and make sure the rider's weight does not fall forward and compromise the horse.

4. Shims make room for the horse's shoulders.

Horses with big movement need a lot of room for their shoulders to move. Short and choppy strides are often an indication of trapped shoulders. With shims, you can create room under the front of the saddle for the shoulders to move freely and never feel pinched or blocked by the saddle. My horse Allure's shoulders move more than six inches!

5. Shims can improve and increase performance.

By using more shims than appears necessary to balance the saddle, you can actually invite a horse to increase his movement and use of his back because the saddle feels even roomier. Just beware that this can make the saddle unstable, so should only be used by more advanced horses and riders, and definitely with the TheraFlex™ Pad's anti-slip properties.

Saddle Systems that Teach

What I love about saddle systems that allow feedback from the horse, is that they reveal when you are out of harmony, and where the horse is feeling pressure. If we learn to read the signs and make the necessary adjustments, the results can be awesome...horses ride better, are happier, and their overall posture, shape and muscles improve. I want to encourage you to experiment with the number of shims you use and with the places you put them. Your horse will tell you how good it feels by the way he moves, lifts his back, lowers his head, lengthens and softens his stride, and you will know by how easy it feels to access your Balance Point. Above all, let common sense prevail!