

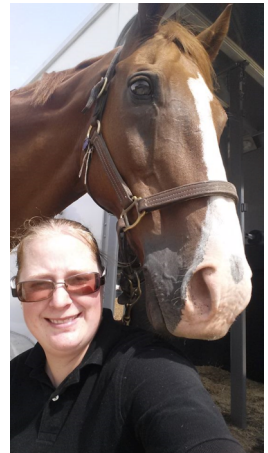
My Journey to Becoming a Qualified Saddle Fitter

I was elated that, on my first attempt, I managed to pass the exam to become a qualified saddle fitter with the Society of Master Saddlers. The exam has a historically low pass rate and I was grateful that the previous five years of hard work and preparation paid off. This major milestone made me stop and think about how to convey why and how I became a saddle fitter.

The Beginning:

My journey began when I bought my horse Fox as an Eventing school master. I had leased him for over a year prior to purchasing him. Once I bought him, I had a saddle fitter out to help me find a saddle. This was my first experience with a saddle fitter and it was not a positive one. My first interaction with this fitter was an argument over the phone. During the fitting appointment, she took a quick look at the used jump saddle I had found and without trying to make it work, she tried to sell me a dressage saddle I could not afford. Ultimately, she told me my jump saddle was fine without making any adjustments, and this is what I rode in for a few years.

A few years later I still had the nagging, not quite right, feeling about my horse and his jump performance. He just was not working as well as I knew he could. I am sure my instructor thought I was a little crazy because he was still doing well. I followed my instincts and had a different saddle fitter out to evaluate my saddle. This new fitter found that the saddle I had been riding in was not suitable for my horse. A lot of the small things we had been struggling with were fixed with a better fitting saddle. However, I could not afford the brand new \$5000 saddle that fit my horse so well and fixed many of our performance issues. As I was searching for a used saddle with the help of this saddle fitter, I began talking to her more about saddle fitting. She needed help and agreed to train me. Even though she was a representative for a specific brand, she knew that if I was going to be an independent fitter I would need more training than what she could provide. It was a great experience and she started me on the journey to become a qualified saddle fitter.



Searching for Saddle Fitting Training

One thing my years in engineering school taught me was to do research. I spent a lot of time checking into the various saddle fitting “schools” available in the USA. I found out that there are only a few options available. I called and talked to several saddle fitters who had gone to the different programs.. Surprisingly, most of the fitters did not have a positive view of their training. Many felt that it was incomplete at best and that since I had already been working as an apprentice to a fitter that they would be a waste of my time and money.

Some of the comments I heard were:

- It was very basic saddle fitting training
- The training changed depending on who was in the class, (not consistent training)
- They spend more time on other subjects and little time on actual saddle fitting

I also found out that most popular schools were only a few weeks in duration after which the participants became a “certified” fitter. I was not happy with these options because I was looking for practical knowledge not a certificate. The one program that most people I talked to thought would satisfy my interests is available through the Society of Master Saddlers (SMS). The people I spoke with felt that it was the most comprehensive program available in the US. Ultimately I signed up for the intro course to see what it was all about.

The Society of Master Saddlers Training

This was exactly what I was looking for! It was both systematic and comprehensive with proven methodology and knowledge. Additionally, it is an internationally recognized training program, and not specific to any brand. The Introductory Class provided the basics of what I needed to understand as a saddle fitter. The course was the stepping stone to becoming a fitter. The amount of information presented during the weekend was astonishing and only the tip of the iceberg. The course covered saddle construction, tree types, veterinary issues with saddle fitting, types of saddles and construction options how and when to use these options, and horse and rider biomechanics. This introductory course provided well rounded basic information that clearly demonstrated how much goes into becoming a good saddle fitter.

Once you get started with the Intro Class, the real information and fun begins. The SMS is really an apprenticeship program. You work with a mentor and continue to take classes until you are ready for the qualified saddle fitters (QSF) exam. It is recommended that you have 3 to 5 years of experience and education before taking exams. During my 4 years with my mentor, Annette, I took the following classes: Saddlery 1 and 2, Bridle Making Level 1, Bench and Onsite Fitting and Bridle Fitting. During these classes I learned how to properly flock a panel, do minor repairs, more about fitting horses and riders and I even built a saddle from the tree up. It allowed me to really understand what I can ask the saddlers to do with the saddles and what the limitations are.



In addition to those SMS recommended classes, I choose to take additional classes including: Symposium of Equine Anatomy and Biomechanics with Dr. Gerd Heuschmann, The USDF “L” Program, Understanding Equine Movement to Realize Your Horse’s Potential by Jillian Kreinbring, and I went overseas to the UK for Centaur Biomechanics Clinic on Biomechanics and Saddle Fitting with Mark Fischer and Russell Guire. During this time I continued to shadow as many saddle fitters as I could.

As part of my apprenticeship I spent a couple of weeks a year with my mentor Annette. I worked with her in the field, saddle fitting and having countless discussions of everything from high low heel syndrome in horses and how it affects saddle fit, to discussions on how a rider’s body proportions affect their saddle comfort. I also watched and read as much as I could about equine anatomy, movement of horses and saddle fit for riders.

Passing the Exam

Finally, after 4 years of studying and 5 years as a saddle fitter, I felt ready to take the exam. Annette also deemed me worthy. I flew to England and prepared myself mentally to be one of only 18 people from around the world to sit for the 2018 exam. They only allow 24 people to take the exam for the first time every year. This year was a little low in attendance because they introduced more requirements.

The QSF candidates broke down to half from the UK and half from the rest of the world. In my class I had people from the USA, New Zealand, Germany, Belgium, Holland as well as the UK.

First, I sat for the flocking exam which comprised of an hour-long written test and a 4-hour practical.

Then I started the QSF exam starting with a 1 hour written exam that covered anything from equine anatomy, to rider influences on the saddle fit, and parts of a saddle.

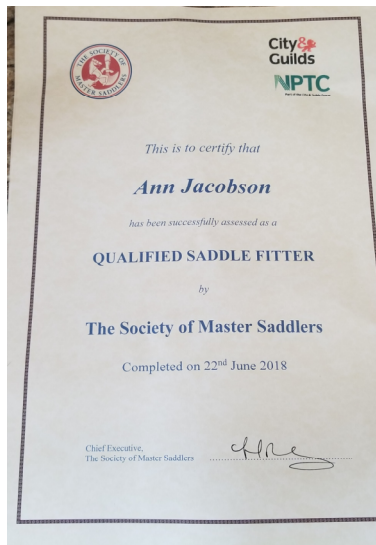
Finally, I took a multipart exam to finish my QSF requirements. Each of the below sections is marked as very good, competent, or not yet competent. If you get even 1 not yet competent score, you fail.

The first of these sections was Conformation and Movement. Then it was on to saddle fitting. I had to assess both a dressage saddle and a GP/Jump saddle during two, 1-hour blocks. Each block was with different horse. For each horse you must complete the 15 points of saddle fitting procedure along with the 7 main points of fit of the saddle. For each horse there are 8 available saddles from which you must create at short list based on how well they fit and make further improvement suggestions.

The last section is on Saddle Faults and Identifications. There is a station with various parts of a saddle and different types of leather that you must identify and tell them where it would be used in a saddle. You are also required to inspect 8 saddles and tell them what is wrong with each. The faults you might find range from a broken tree to crooked panels, loose stirrup bars, and improper stitching among other issues.

Finally, Success!

I honestly thought even after 4 years of preparation, I had failed the exam. I even messaged some of my friends that night to tell them I had failed. I knew the results would not be sent out until I was somewhere over the Atlantic on my long flight home. I was shocked when I landed and read the email saying that I passed! I even did a happy dance in the aisle of the plane getting a few funny looks from the other passengers. My class has less than a 50% pass rate on the first attempt.



The one of the perks is that I can now say I have a degree in saddle fitting from the UK. The degree is from the SMS, a part of the City's and Guilds Program. Being certified as an SMS Fitter is equivalent to an associated degree in saddle fitting.

I really hope this blog has given you some insight into what it takes to be a qualified saddle fitter with the Society of Master Saddlers. I am honored to be one of the few in the world (approximately 22 registered in the US) to have gone through this process and achieved this status of SMS qualified Saddle fitter.