

TTIPS VOL. 5/22 - Insights

Bike Fit

"You know you're addicted to cycling when you no longer require a Kleenex to blow your nose."

Hi riders. Last week we discussed a few finer points of handlebars and relevant considerations regarding the "fit" of your bike. Recall that we noted three points of contact between your bike and your body, your hands, your backside, and your feet. This week let's talk about the second point of contact, the saddle. Some people call it the seat, but technically it's a saddle. Again, my purpose here is to provide insights into your "fit" that might help to make you a better-informed rider, not to cover every possible detail. If you are having saddle issues or want a new saddle, I hope this will provide a good starting point for your search.

Long Hours in the Saddle

I most enjoy endurance riding on my road bike, that is, riding very long distances in a single stretch. I ride lots of "century" events, that is, 100 miles at one time. A ride I really like is in Washington DC and Maryland named "The Total 200." Yep, you guessed it, 200 miles in one day, a double century. I've done it four times, and it's a genuine test of endurance and, perhaps, will power. At the finish line you know for certain whether you have a good fit or not, and you especially know whether you have the right saddle for you.

Assuming I have a good overall fit, I can think of no other part of my bike that so profoundly impacts overall comfort, performance, and endurance than my saddle. Indeed, many of my fellow endurance riders, male and female, did not finish those events because they could no longer endure the misery of their sore backsides or other parts of their undercarriage. What started as a day of enthusiasm with great expectations of fun and camaraderie often ended prematurely in soreness, disappointment, and a ride to the finish line in the SAG wagon. A different saddle might have allowed a better outcome.

Choosing a Saddle

Clearly, choosing the correct saddle can be the difference between owning a bike that you can't wait to ride, or one that sits in the corner of the garage gathering dust because it's just not comfortable for more than a few miles. In my personal experience I went through four saddles on my current bike before finding one that satisfied me.

Like many things in this sport, there are a bewildering number of saddle choices, with those choices ranging in price from the affordable to the very expensive. Some have titanium, steel,

chrome moly, or carbon fiber rails, some have extra cushioning, and most have very distinct, purposeful shapes. That's all good, but in the end (no pun intended) what matters most is comfort, and ONLY you will know which is the best for you. Don't let someone else pick a saddle for you, and you don't need to settle for the one that came with your bike.

With all the available choices, and other than randomly trying out different saddles (a potentially expensive proposition), how do we help narrow the number of candidates? Here are some things that might help you decide.

Here are examples of wrong ways: choosing a saddle based on this:

Color: "I picked this one because it's a really pretty color."

Shape: "I picked this one because it looks like Darth Vader's helmet."

Indifference: "Well, it's the one that came with the bike."

Price: "I picked the most expensive one I could find, so it must be good."

Apathy: "It doesn't really matter what saddle I use; they are all the same."

Padding: "More padding is better, right?"

None of those are good reasons on their own to choose a saddle. On the other hand,

Here are the top guidelines and considerations:

Sit bone distance (perhaps the most important)

Torso angle (racer, sport rider, recreational rider)

Pelvic motion (how your pelvis moves as you ride)

Surrounding soft tissues

Men's saddles are different than women's saddles (Women's are shorter, wider, and rounder)

There's not enough room here to discuss all of these in depth, but let's talk about these two most important features:

First, your sit bone distance. For your purists, when we discuss sit bones, we are talking about the ischium. This is the set of two bones - one in each cheek of your backside - that are closer to each other (narrower) in the front of your body, and further from each other (wider) in the back of your body. We are talking about the distance between the two bones in your backside that bear the weight of your torso when you sit. A fitter, or a good bike shop can help you measure these in a dignified manner, but you can do it yourself if you wish. Find a sitting surface that is about at your knee level. Place a thin cushion or a rug (something like a bathroom mat, or a

thinly folded towel on the seat. Cover the cushioned seat with a piece of tin foil from your kitchen. Sit down gently on the seat that you have just created, with your best posture, keeping your torso perpendicular to the floor. Gently rock left and right a few times. Stand up and look at the foil. You should see two rounded indentations where your sit bones supported your weight. With a Sharpie pen, draw an approximate circle around the outer edge of the indents. Put a dot in the center of the two circles, then measure the distance between those dots. Voila! That's your sit bone distance and the empirical starting point for your decision on choosing your saddle width. Remember, you just measured your sit bones - the two spots that bear your saddle can be, and likewise, the closer your torso is to the upright position - away from your handlebars - the wider your saddle must be. For the purposes of this article, the range of possible rider positions is Aero, Racing, Sports, Recreation, Casual. Each of these riders has an associated sizing increment to guide their saddle choice. They are Aero/0mm; Racing/10mm; Sports/20mm; Recreation/30mm; Casual/40mm. (I'm using metric measurements because nearly all saddles are labeled in metric sizes). Most of us in KABC who ride bikes with drop bars are likely Sports riders. I suspect most in KABC with straight bars are Recreation riders. So how does one use this increment in sizing their saddle?

Example. So, let's say you measured your sit bones distance at 100mm. If you are a Sports rider, you add your 20mm increment to each side of your hypothetical saddle (20mm to the left side, and 20mm to the right side): $2 \times 20 = 40$ mm. Then, add your sit bones distance to your total increment: $100\text{mm} + 40\text{mm} = 140\text{mm}$. Hypothetically your ideal saddle width is 140mm, or just a hair over 5.5 inches. This is a good starting point to guide your search and to discuss with your fitter.

Other Common-Sense Guidelines for Choosing a Saddle:

Wait until the rest of your bike fit is complete before testing and choosing a saddle.

Don't choose a saddle based on only a parking lot ride. If possible, try the saddle several times on a typical ride and be sure you are wearing your cycling shorts/bib during your test ride. Conduct most of your test ride on flat ground (easy to do in the low country).

Good bike stores have saddle libraries. Don't rush, try several. A certain bike manufacturer will even let you return any saddle within 30 days of purchase, no questions asked. Just ask me if you want their name.

Start with a standard shape, the pear shape.

Choose one with plenty of flat sitting surface, despite the number of contours.

Make sure your saddle is clamped as close to the center of the rails as possible to start with.

Don't choose just because of a good consumer review, or a good recommendation.

Lots of padding is not necessarily good. It may feel good at the start but later can lead to pinching.

Some saddles have a groove down the middle. This is formally known as perineal relief channel, and informally known as a "cut out" or a "love groove." Such saddle can offer considerable relief to men and women suffering chafing, friction irritation, or numbness. Do not ignore these symptoms as they can lead to permanent physical damage.

Let me leave you with this. I'll say it again: **DON'T LET SOMEONE CHOOSE YOUR SADDLE FOR YOU.** Try it several times to make sure it works for you in the kind of riding that you most do. In the end analysis, the best saddle for you is the one that feels right for your style of riding.

Next time we'll talk about shoes and pedals, the third point of contact between you and your bike. Until then.....

Make Every Ride Epic,

Darryl