

Question of the Week: The Long and Short of English Stirrups

My stirrups never feel like they're the right length. How do I fix this?

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Q: I've ridden western for years and just bought an English saddle so I can enjoy riding both styles. But I can't get comfortable with the length of the stirrups on my English saddle. They either feel too long or too short, and sometimes they feel uneven. How do I fix this problem?

A: Even though the basics of western and English riding are the same, the difference in stirrup length can take some getting used to, especially if you're switching back and forth. Not only do your muscles get conditioned to a certain feel, but an English saddle's construction and shorter stirrup length alters your seat to a more forward position. Eventually, though, you'll feel at home in both saddles.

The tried and true method of finding the correct length in an English saddle is to sit in the deepest part of your saddle (that's directly behind the pommel) and allow your legs to relax and hang down, against your horse's sides. The bar of the stirrup iron (the step where you rest the ball of your foot) should bump against your ankle bone. To make sure your stirrups are even, have a friend stand directly in front of your horse's shoulders and eyeball the irons from head-on. If necessary, carefully punch a new hole in the stirrup leather to align your irons evenly, however, don't go overboard. Too many holes will cause your leathers to stretch, once again making one longer than the other.

Finally, if your stirrups start out even but begin to feel uneven as you ride, check the tightness of your girth. A loose girth can cause your saddle to shift to one side. Plus, if you habitually place more weight in one iron than the other, your saddle will tilt toward that side. That can also give you the sensation that your stirrups are uneven. Ironically, lots of work without stirrups will help you adjust to your new English saddle. As you rely less and less on your stirrups for security, their length will become less of an issue.

--Cindy Hale

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