



Photo courtesy of Tom Baldwin

Deb Hilberg and her pony Sand Hill Cabarnough EyrI in their Custom Ioon Flight, fitted by Sarah Boothe.

**P**onies are worth their weight in gold when it comes to providing hours in the stirrups for young aspiring equestrians. In fact, many of today's most accomplished riders started out as pony riders. For developing young dressage riders, ponies can be the perfect choice; however, like big horses, their body types can prove challenging when it comes to finding the ideal saddle. *By choosing a saddle carefully and considering customized options like those available through Custom Saddlery, riders and their ponies have the best chance to comfortably progress with daily training and excel in the show arena.*

**CUSTOM SADDLERY  
EXPERTS EQUIP  
SMALL-SIZED  
SUPERSTARS  
FOR SUCCESS IN  
THE SHOW RING**

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A premier manufacturer of customized saddles and a top choice for dressage riders around the world, including Olympians Steffen Peters and Patrik Kittel, Custom Saddlery crafts saddles specifically made for ponies, too. The company has expert fitters located throughout the United States and the world to help riders find just what they are looking for. "Custom now has over 30 saddle fitters worldwide!" confirmed Sarah Boothe, Professional Saddler and Senior Saddle Fitter for Custom Saddlery. The company is known for providing excellent equipment to Olympians, International Grand Prix riders, the Tempel Lipizzans, young riders, and adult amateurs who want the perfect fit.



CUSTOM ICON FLIGHT



**"PEOPLE FREQUENTLY ASSUME THEIR PONY NEEDS AN EXTRA, EXTRA WIDE TREE, THAT IS SOMETIMES TRUE, BUT MANY TIMES IS NOT. AT CUSTOM SADDLERY, WE SET UP THE SADDLE TO FIT THE PONY'S MEASUREMENTS RATHER THAN ASSUMING ALL PONIES ARE SUPER WIDE."** -Stacy Berger

*Bigger isn't necessarily better, and over the last decade, the popularity of ponies for dressage competition has skyrocketed. American dressage riders are taking notice of these athletic and intelligent partners who are the perfect choice for children and small adults. With the interest in pony competition mounting, Custom Saddlery is keeping pace by offering a variety of options for hard to fit, pint-sized superstars.*

Stacy Berger, a saddle fitter with 10 years of experience with Custom Saddlery, said, "Ponies, like horses, must have a saddle that is the proper width with a tree that is the correct shape to match their conformation. It is important to work with a saddle fitter to find a solution that is safe for both the pony and the rider."

From the mutton-withered to the slab-sided, the short-backed to the croup high, ponies require a special set of saddle-fitting parameters when equipping them for comfort and performance. There are all sorts of ponies whose shapes

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PQ Spotlight on EQUIPMENT  
continued



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make finding the right saddle a challenge, and there is much at stake. Ear pinning, tail twishing, spookiness, and evasion of the bit can all be signs that the current saddle just isn't working. Saddle fit for ponies can be tricky, but purchasing the proper model is one of the most important investments a rider will make.

"Every pony is unique; there is no magic 'one size fits all' solution out there," said Berger, who works with Custom Saddlery clients in northern California, Reno/Carson City, Nevada, and central/southern Oregon. "While some ponies may have backs similar to a full-sized horse, many are very short coupled, which doesn't provide much real estate for the saddle, especially if they have an adult rider. In particular, some horses that measure to be a pony – Arabians or Arabian crosses for example – can be extremely short coupled as they have one less vertebrae than other equines."

When a saddle is too large, it can place the rider on the weaker lumbar vertebrae, which is the non-weight bearing area, causing back soreness. "Most important is the length of the saddle on the pony's back," said Boothe, whose Custom Saddlery clients include internationally ranked dressage professionals in her service area of central California, Scottsdale, Arizona, and Las Vegas, Nevada. "Custom Saddlery actually measures each pony's back to get the exact fit. With the



Golden State NRW with rider Shona Cornett in his navy blue Custom Icon Flight, fitted by Stacy Berger (Photo courtesy of Tamara Torta)

*"Like their larger counterparts, ponies also need a saddle that sits correctly behind their shoulders, allowing for freedom of movement. The saddle must also distribute pressure evenly without bridging or rocking. The ideal saddle is designed so that the rider is close to the center of balance, enabling the pony to carry the rider with ease."*  
-Stacy Berger

"pony panel" we offer, the rider's seat size stays the same but the saddle length is shorter and the overall footprint on the pony is smaller. We can order the pony panel on any of our models. We also offer two of our popular saddles in a junior size: a mini Signature Steffen's Advantage and a mini Wolfgang Solo Jr. They start in a 15-inch seat."

Like their larger counterparts, ponies also need a saddle that sits correctly behind their shoulders, allowing for freedom of movement. The saddle must also distribute pressure evenly without bridging or rocking. The ideal saddle is designed so that the rider is close to the center of balance, enabling the pony to carry the rider with ease.

"If the saddle is too narrow, the tree will bridge across the back, causing soreness at the withers and lower back, and usually will ride up on the pony's withers towards the neck," said Berger. "Wide-backed ponies frequently do well with a saddle tree that has a hoop shape and sits flat across the back. Custom Saddlery has a few saddles with hoop-type trees to accommodate this, and a few models that are perfect for the flat-backed pony."

Commenting on her own unique experiences, Berger added, "The saddles that work well on ponies that I have fit are the Icon Flight with pony panels; the Wolfgang Omni

(which has a shorter tree length) with pony panels; and the Wolfgang Solo Jr. with pony panels. The newly designed Wolfgang Solo Jr. has panels that are cut back for the shoulders, which enable ponies to move their shoulders freely."

Any saddle that a young rider chooses should help that rider sit into the pony, connecting the rider's body through the seat, and aiding the process of becoming fully part of the movement. "People don't realize how broad ponies' backs can be," said Boothe. "You want a saddle that is low profile and wraps around the pony, versus having that sitting-on-top feel."

"People frequently assume their pony needs an extra, extra wide tree," Berger added. "That is sometimes true, but many times is not. At Custom Saddlery, we set up the saddle to fit the pony's measurements rather than assuming all ponies are super wide. Another common misconception is that ponies always need a special pony saddle. Many times the saddle that works well on a horse can be set up to work well on a pony with similar conformation."

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After repeatedly encountering horses with very tight, sore backs in her work as an equine massage therapist, Sharon Cooper, one of Custom Saddlery's Florida-based fitters, found the cause of the back issues to be poorly fitting saddles. Cooper began her career 15 years ago as an equine massage therapist, and has been a saddle fitter for Custom Saddlery since 2014.

"The hardest part of saddle fitting is the horses that are outside the range of normal fit. Ponies can be a big challenge," Cooper said. "You have either the very plump, round pony with no withers, or the skinny, slab-sided pony. The round pony presents an issue in that it is hard to get the saddle to stay in place; it is like fitting a saddle to a propane tank!" For this challenge, Cooper has had good luck with a lower pommel saddle such as the Wolfgang Solo Jr. or the Wolfgang Omni.

Cooper has been very successful in matching ponies with some sway to their backs with the Wolfgang Constanze. The Constanze is built on a shorter tree that helps with the short back. She then adds the pony panel, and can also have the back of the panel stitched higher up the cantle to give an upsweep to the back of the saddle. Riders of slab-sided ponies also benefit from trying the Wolfgang Constanze. "I have several ponies in the Constanze," said Cooper. "Again, I go with the pony panel and the upsweep at the back."

Saddle choice options for pony riders are numerous, and Custom Saddlery can customize models in a myriad of ways, while suiting individual taste and

preferences. Pony riders can order saddles with shorter flaps to enable improved leg contact and, of course, there are countless aesthetic options to choose from. Colored or patent leather accents, colored stitching, crystals, and other fun accents are a specialty of Custom Saddlery.

Whether aiming for the show ring or simply backyard fun, Custom Saddlery wants to instill the importance of properly fitting saddles in young riders so that both pony and rider will remain healthy, happy, and performing to the best of their abilities. The company provides top-quality saddles and accessories, along with expert saddle fitting services around the world, to accommodate the perfect fit.

Based in Aiken, South Carolina, Custom Saddlery designs all saddles anatomically for horse and rider, handcrafts them with the finest leathers, and manufactures them using technically advanced methods and features. Custom Saddlery is devoted to supplying high-quality, customized saddles for professionals and amateurs.

Pony riders interested in trying a saddle can take advantage of the company's 10-day free trial program. For more information about Custom Saddlery, its wide range of saddle models, and its group of saddle fitting experts, visit [www.mysaddle.com](http://www.mysaddle.com) or call (800) 235-3865.

