

Balance Straps & the Side Saddle

By the Australian Side Saddle Community



The topic of balance straps in the side saddle world often creates confusion, largely because there isn't just one type.

Just like side saddles themselves, balance straps were designed with different purposes in mind.

Some may suit your discipline and horse perfectly, while others may not be appropriate at all.

The “Standard” Balance Strap

Commonly seen on a hunt side saddle.

- Buckled near the front of the saddle under the rider's legs
- Runs over the girth
- Passes under the horse's belly
- Through a keeper
- Attaches near the cantle on the opposite side

Assists in stabilising the rear of the saddle and keeping it central on the horse's back, which is particularly important in the hunt field and serious jumping.

Combo Girth / Short Balance Strap

Usually seen on a threefold saddle.

- Shorter in length
 - Highly desirable in the show ring
 - Not considered secure enough for serious jumping due to its short nature
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The “Tony Gifford” Balance Strap

Designed by saddler Tony Gifford. This design is similar in concept to the combo/short strap - but improved:

- The strap portion is longer
- Secured in the middle of the girth via a “D” ring
- Allows the strap to move and settle more naturally against the horse

Why it stands out:

- Starting from the centre of the girth provides more security than the short/combo version
 - More stable than the standard strap that buckles from the near side and can shift (even with a keeper)
 - In comparative testing: same horses, same saddles, different “balance straps” with various riders, this design proved the most stable and the preferred choice.
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When a Balance Strap Can Be Counterproductive

Did you know a balance strap can occasionally pull or twist a side saddle too far to the right?

While not common, it does happen and needs to be given consideration.

Western Side Saddles

Some western side saddles:

- Use an English-style balance strap
 - Forgo the balance strap entirely due to their rigging system
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English Side Saddles & Strap Variations

If you look through historical photographs, you will often see ladies riding without one.

Just like astride saddles, side saddles were built for different purposes. Many were never designed for the rigours of hunting or jumping, meaning a balance strap was not necessarily required (or desired) as part of their structure and use.

- **Show saddles** – often have a removable balance strap ‘billet’ or no balance strap at all
 - **Park saddles** – may come with a balance strap or none at all
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Y-Girthing

Many older saddles were fitted with Y-girthing. This is still a very popular design.

- Commonly seen over the offside flap
 - Sometimes found underneath
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The “Sefton Girth” / Champion & Wilton Setup

Saddles by Champion and Wilton often feature a standard balance strap arrangement commonly referred to as the “Sefton Girth.”

This refers to:

- A buckle attached to the long tree point of the saddle
- A strap with a buckle on one end and holes on the other

This differs from the more commonly seen balance strap that has a buckle at both ends. This design can occasionally be found on other makes as well.

Do You Actually Need a Balance Strap?

Generally “yes”, but the question may arise under varying circumstances and/or the type of side saddle you have which may not have one.

Ask yourself:

- What type of riding am I doing?
- Is my saddle correctly fitted, balanced and centralised?
- Is my horse comfortable?
- Am I a stable, balanced rider?

Balance straps are highly recommended and encouraged. However, you and your horse may not need a balance strap at all. Be wise in your decision making and the type of riding you wish to do – this determines the type of side saddle you will need.

NOTE OF COURTESY:

Seen a rider without a balance strap? Never assume you know their reasons.

Are you going to be doing rigorous work – Show Jumping? Hunting? Etc. You will need an appropriate “hunt” side saddle and a suitable balance strap.

REMEMBER:

- * Not all side saddles have or need one due to their design and job purpose
- * Not all horses accept balance straps - period

Beginners are strongly advised to use one where possible, at least initially. If your horse does not accept one, consider gaining experience on another horse until your balance and security improve enough to ride safely without it.

Balance straps are not a “one size fits all” solution, they are a tool. And like any tool, their value depends entirely on the job at hand, the equipment beneath you, and the partnership you have with your horse.

IMPORTANT:

Your balance strap should be firm but not pulled up so tight that it will cause your equine friend discomfort.

NOTE: Many respected UK and US authors make reference to the balance strap in their writings.

Some describe it as optional, though highly recommended.

Others state that it is not strictly required.

A few go so far as to call it “a matter of individual taste”.

Context matters. Discipline matters. Horse temperament matters. Rider experience matters.