Ghost Treeless Saddle Fitting Advice

1. Check your saddle over to make sure nothing changed during transport. The panels should be velcroed in place with the inside edge aligning to the seams on the bottom of the base and centered front to back. If the horse has wide spinal processes and/or the rider is very light, I might widen a bit. If the horse is narrow without wide spinal processes and has a higher wither, I might narrow a bit.
2. Set the saddle on the horse either with the Ghost pad tied center front and rear or without a pad, but start a bit forward over the shoulders. Then wiggle the saddle back, feeling for a natural stopping point. Repeat a couple times. This is likely where your saddle will want to sit, but the horse’s conformational changes with motion may change things. Note the position of the saddle and put back in place with your pad if not using a Ghost pad.
3. Align the billet straps and girth with the horse’s natural girth groove. With the sliding V rigging, tug into place (this becomes easier after a couple rides). With the fixed billets align them to the girth buckles. You may tighten the front strap one hole higher than the rear for best alignment. Sometimes it even feels natural to cross the straps. But only send the billet through a pad keeper if it lines up with the girth groove – this often means only one strap goes through.
4. Hang your stirrups from the front or back ring. Best guess is fine, but longer foot can indicate the forward ring. Do be prepared to change rings if you feel out of balance or out of sync with your horse’s motion. You might be surprised how much easier it can be to ride with your stirrup hung back from where previous saddles have put it.
5. Go for a ride – use a mounting block for your first mounts, check your girth tightness or have someone tighten particularly for your first few rides while the saddle beds down. Pay attention to the following:
a. Horse’s attitude – pinned ears, willingness to go straight

b. Horse’s gait and stride length – does your gaited horse gait, is the stride length long and symmetrical?
c. Rider stability – shift your weight slightly to make sure it’s stable side to side, ride around a bit, is the saddle moving forward and back, either moving greatly and staying in that position or repeatedly forward and back? Do you feel tipped forward?

d. If you have forward/back stability issues take before and after pics and discuss with your dealer. Best to capture whole horse directly from the side, on level ground before saddling, after saddling, and after riding. It’s also easier to judge saddle balance with the rider in place.

1. Here are some quick trouble shooting suggestions, but if anything isn’t obvious, contact your dealer.
a. If your horse seems unhappy, try a different pad, perhaps one you’ve used successfully with a previous saddle. Sympanova, especially when new, can be a bit grippy and pull shedding hairs before they’re ready. Or it’s just a different feel to a picky horse. Address any of the other items above and try again.

b. It is quite typical with Ghost that a horse will gait better and increase stride length. Two things to note with this response. First, you should always do at least three rides with a new saddle before committing to purchase. Sometimes the first ride is just “oh thankfully this isn’t the old saddle”, then “hmm, still ok, but there’s this thing…” and then “oh no, that thing is real.” Second, if your horse is suddenly moving so much better, don’t go do a 40k tear up the mountains, they’re likely to strain something using muscles they’ve been reluctant to use as freely. If you have a negative response here, address the other items before trying again and discuss with your dealer.

c. I usually test side to side stability on dismount – you were already aiming toward the ground, right? But do it carefully and find out just how stable the Ghost is on *your* horse. While Ghost is remarkably stable due to the panel design, some horse shapes just aren’t as stable and the nature of a treeless saddle is that it’s quite happy to fit the shape of your horse when it’s off kilter by 30 degrees. You’ll probably need to tighten your girth one hole tighter than a treed saddle. A breast collar is always a good idea with any saddle, but particularly treeless. If your saddle is going forward too much (and treeless isn’t going to interfere with scapula motion the same as a tree), use a shaped girth to allow the girth to be forward while the saddle stays back, and especially if you also feel tipped forward, consider using rider balancing shims on a downhill (in the area the saddle wants to sit) or a horse with less curvature or flare toward the shoulder. If the saddle is slipping back, particularly into underdeveloped areas behind the shoulder it is critical to balance the rider so they’re not putting more pressure into this area, hopefully allowing the muscles to get better use with the treeless and rebuild the topline. It can sometimes be necessary to do a program of groundwork and strengthening exercises before a new saddle can be properly evaluated. Shims will be discussed more fully below.

d. As mentioned above, with position issues, take pics and discuss with your dealer. Shims, girth rigging alternatives, girth shape, even stirrup hanger position can all affect saddle position and stability.
2. Shimming – since the saddle will form to fit most horse shapes, we actually spend more time balancing the rider when it comes to “fit”. There are several options, and almost all shimming involves lifting the front of the saddle if the rider is tipped forward. This is for two reasons – first, the saddle has more ability to change in the front and the rider is more likely to put their weight forward for various reasons. The pommel may spread over the first 3 rides and then stay in that position unless the rider is riding multiple horses. Also, the saddle base has a natural curve which allows for shoulder flare of warmblood and pony types, but for the straighter backed types, the curve allows the saddle to tip forward (even though it isn’t really rocking because it’s not solid). So the shims fill in that triangle gap. Wool felt can be cut into shapes that go inside the panels (with Velcro openings) or inside the pad. Panels with a wedge inside may also be ordered or a wedge in a pocket that goes between the panel and base do a great job with the more downhill horses.
3. Additional shimming possibilities – it is possible to shim almost anywhere there’s Velcro. I worked with a customer with a hip joint condition that would come out of the socket if not supported and then she bought a narrow-loined horsed. We put shims inside the outer back edge of the panels and under the back of the seat to support her seat bones as widely as possible. Best materials are something non-compressible. I use wool felt, people have also cut up old wool western pads of yoga mats.
4. If you have a horse that is both downhill where the saddle sits (rider feels tipped forward) and asymmetrical (saddle constantly shifts to one side but the panels are correctly positioned and the rider doesn’t have sided issues) then use more panel shims on the side the saddle shifts toward and use the velcro pocket shims to manage the rider balance.
5. Occasionally someone looks at the saddle sitting on the horse before riding and thinks it might bridge, especially if the horse has a dippy back. The saddle has enough structure to distribute weight and protect the horse’s spine, but not enough to bridge except in the case of a very dipped back and a very light rider.
6. Many people worry that the saddle is perched, separating the rider from the horse. Part of this is just a visual effect and part of it is real. In order to protect the horse’s spine better than most treeless saddles and to give the rider a comfortable twist even on wider horses, it is necessary to lift the seat a bit above the back. One of the real concerns of a perched saddle particularly for a treed saddle is that it would be unstable side to side and would lose potential to distribute weight over the largest area possible. But the design of the panels plus the ability of the saddle to conform to the horse over the first couple rides generally means neither of these issues are a problem with Ghost. In most cases, just ignore both the real lift to provide these benefits plus the visual from the raised pommel and ride, looking forward as your instructor has probably told you to do ;-) and you will realize both stability as well as the amazing feel of your horse communicated through the flexible, moldable layers of the saddle and panels.
7. Ghost offers two English rigging options - the sliding V and the Puro/fixed Y. The V can move with your horse, particularly useful for those horses with powerful, laid-back shoulders and either driving, high loins or a forward girth groove. These shouldn’t be motions you would notice as a rider, but can prevent rubbing or irritation with those types of conformation/motion. The fixed Y is a bit slimmer under the leg and can help stabilize the saddle for horses that move the saddle in a manner noticeable to the rider. The fixed straps can be used to align the girth in the girth groove while the saddle stays back by using a shorter hole in front or even crossing the billets. It works for 90% of horses.
8. Ghost’s standard positions for the two rings are better on average than probably 75% of saddles out there. Here’s a little trick to figure out which to start with (and how to avoid badly designed saddles in the future). If you sit in the saddle with stirrups dropped but feet lifted to a natural stirrup position and no arch in your back, feel for your seat bones and mark the spot on the edge of the saddle. Hop off, place your pinky on a vertical line down from that spot, spread your hand wide and your thumb should be roughly where your stirrup should hang from. This is because your spread hand is roughly the same distance from your heel to the ball of your foot. If your goal is shoulder-hip-heel alignment, this should get you in the ball park. Women with small feet constantly fight most off the shelf saddles which have just been copied for generations from saddles made for men.