

## What Size Horse is Right For You

Each generation people keep getting larger, but horses do not! If you have a chance to look at the antique western saddles, most of the time the seat measures 12.5 inches to 14.5 inches. No, these are not children's saddles. They are adult saddles. Beds were 6 inches to 12 inches shorter then. Over a hundred years ago women were usually less than 5' and men were about 5' to 5'5" tall. They did not carry an extra ounce of fat.

Today women are about 5'7" plus and 145 to 185 pounds. Men are 6 foot and over weighing 175 pounds to 225 pounds. (Of course, many folks are heavier.)

Did our horses grow larger during the last 125 years? Not as a general rule, with the exception of well bred Quarter horses and some of the newer imported breeds that are now popular. Today great care needs to be taken in selecting a horse that is the correct size for you. The bone structure is so very important to look at and then the size of the horse. If a horse has tiny legs and a huge body, the horses can hardly carry themselves.

Many breeds of horse have changed over the years. Tennessee Walking Horses were bred to carry the heavier plantation owners all day at a comfortable ride. The plantation owners weighed 150 to 165 pounds. That was a heavy person then. Remember these men were short also.

Often today, the TWH will not have the huge chest, rump, and bone structure of the original TWH that was bred to carry its owner all day. Some breeders have realized the problem of breeding the slighter built TWH, who look very pretty, but cannot carry much weight. They are trying to go back to the foundation type stock to build the Walking Horse back to the size it was meant to be.

Years ago, American Saddlebreds were used for carriage horses, jumping, cross-country, hunt, and many other disciplines. Once again, the breeders like the delicate look. Many breeders once again are looking for foundation stock to infuse back into their breeding stock. The horse was much heavier and had a large bone structure.

Let's take a look at Thoroughbreds. This horse is mainly bred to carry no more than 125 pounds very fast for a short distance. Do I need to say more! Just think about the number of Thoroughbreds whose lives end with a broken leg while running a race. The European TB often are heavier boned horses.

Another problem is that horses are started under saddle too early in their lives. Most horses have not developed enough until they are three or four years old. Then they should initially carry only lightweight people. Muscle needs to be built slowly by walking...and walking...and walking. Strengthening and developing the bones needs to be considered.

How does one determine the proper size horse for him/herself? (This will not work for ponies or pony size horses.) Here is a formula with example:

1. Add up the total weight of the horse, rider, and tack. **Our example: Horse + rider + tack= 1188 pounds**
2. Measure the circumference of the cannon bone midway between the knee and fetlock. **Our example: 7.5 inches**
3. Divide the total weight by the circumference. **Our example:  $1188 / 7.5 = 158.4$**
4. Divide the result by two. **Our example:  $158.4 / 2 = 79.2$**

**Values below 75 are great! Values from 75-80 are acceptable. Values over 80 indicate weaker legs and a need to train carefully, especially downhill. At this level a rider needs a horse with more substance.**

**\* Reference: The Heavier Riders' Guide by Beverly Whittington and Rhonda Hart-Poe**

In our example the horse rated near the end of the acceptable range and should be able to carry the rider comfortably. However, how the horse has or has not been conditioned in addition to how it will be ridden should be considered.

Note that cannon bone circumference (as overall bone substance) increases with the horse's fitness level, so if he is borderline, as in the example, it doesn't necessarily mean you're too big for him. By "slow racking" up, Long-Slow-Distance (LSD) miles, which builds up bone over time, he may measure up yet. Be patient. It can take up to three years for bone to remodel. (This is not for the weekend rider and only for the committed horse person.)

When shopping for a horse, you will find that the average horse has been lounging in the field or paddock. The overweight or out-of-shape horse must be conditioned, slowly, prior to carry a heavy load.

Unfortunately, the average "back yard horse" is generally not in any better condition than the average "weekend rider", which includes a lot of us. Such horses should not be expected to carry 20 percent of their body weight. Add a rider who is heavier, and possibly less balanced and/or less athletic, and it becomes obvious that the stouter and/or better conditioned horse will be more able to carry the person comfortably, safely, with the less chance of injury. (Providing the cannon bones measure up to the right size.)

Have your veterinarian perform a thorough "soundness" exam. Explain that the horse will be carrying extra weight and ask him or her to be especially thorough in his

evaluation of the horse's back structure and suspensory ligaments in the legs. Be careful of the veterinarian you choose! They do not study the structure of the horse versus the rider's weight in vet school. The vet can determine if the horse is sound for riding, only, not the right size horse for you.

The rider should be very concerned about finding a lightweight saddle that fits both the horse and him/herself. Many saddle manufacturers still think the heaviest rider is going to weigh 150 pounds and it may be difficult to find a large enough seat for you and fits the horse too. If you are stuffed into a saddle that is too small, you can easily damage your knees and hips. You will not be able to balance in the saddle.

HPS sees the results of the damage done to horses that were not conditioned and were ridden too hard, that had too heavy riders, or were asked to go at speeds for too long a period of time compared to the horse's body condition. Many of these horses have been destroyed and will never be able to carry any rider again.

The suspensory ligament carries too much of the stress and weight causing injury that will result in an illness called DSLD. (Degenerative Suspensory Ligament Desmitis)

You can [click here](#) to read the full research done at the University of Georgia and others.

I will cut to the chase concerning the research. DSLD not only affects the suspensory ligament, but the degeneration spreads through out the whole horse affecting many areas. **There is no cure.** Once it gets started there is no hope for the horse and it can expect a life of pain and continuing degeneration. HPS will have to euthanize at least one horse a year because of this illness.

More Paso Finos were used in some studies than any other breed of horse. Think of the size of the people who originally bred Paso Finos and the size of the average person in this country who is riding this breed. The Criollo is the smaller type Paso and many are under 15 hands. HPS has one of each type of Paso Fino. The large one could carry 145 to 150 pounds. Remember this includes saddle, bridle, blanket, and rider.

The good news is that more large boned horses are being bred for the jumping and the hunter disciplines. Not all of the horses will work out for what they have been bred. The draft type horses usually have wonderful personalities.

These bigger horses are often crossed with Saddlebreds and Thoroughbreds. Some are the draft type horses crossed with Quarter Horses. Carry your tape measure with you to check the cannon bone. Some of the crossed breeds may have inherited the smaller leg bones. The other important thing to think about is that the heavier horses do not mature as fast as the lighter weight horses. They should not be started under saddle until they are at least four years old, providing they have been fed correctly to promote

the correct growth at the correct time. If the horse has been started too early the damage may already be starting.

There are many draft type horses available across the country for sale. Be careful! Many have arthritis from being over worked in the fields for many years. The vet check is well worth the money before the purchase is completed. A pure bred Draft horse was developed to pull, not to carry weight on its back. A Draft cross makes a much better riding horse. Draft horses should not trot or canter while carrying a rider. Their backs will not hold-up.

DSLDD used to be called 'coon footed' and was thought to be a conformation problem. Currently, the common name is 'dropped pasterns'. The worst part of DSLDD is that a horse may have this condition and the owner may not realize it since not all pasterns will drop. At times the suspensory ligament will thicken and not drop. Your veterinarian can use ultra sound to test the horse's tendons for this condition. Not all veterinarians are up to date on DSLDD and the testing.

**I received an email from Cricket Cole, a farrier of 32 years, who pointed out an important concern when selecting a horse. Cricket gave her permission to reprint her email here. There are different issues that may have to be taken into consideration depending on where you live in the country. Cricket shared with me in another email that she mainly deals with Quarter horses where she lives. We see a cross-section of many different breeds in North Carolina.**

*Hi - I just read your "What Size Horse is Right for You?" article, and wanted to make one small nitpick... horses \*have\* gotten larger... considerably so. What \*hasn't\* grown proportionally is the feet and bone.*

*I watched the movie "The Big Trail" (John Wayne's first starring vehicle, filmed in I think 1928?) a few years ago, and was flabbergasted by the size of the feet vs. the size of the horses. While I knew that feet had been bred down, as horses were bred up (think Impressive, and tiny little feet for halter), I didn't realize it had been that extreme.*

*When I started shoeing, 32 years ago, a 15.2h horse (there were a fair number, though "tall" wasn't the big thing it is now) would almost always wear a #2 shoe. Now I rarely use any, and that's after I dropped all my halter and western pleasure clients... there was a stretch where half the horses that size that I was doing took #00s. Things have improved a bit, but people still don't get the surface to volume ratio, and the horses I shoe are pretty reliably smaller footed than an otherwise identical horse would have been thirty years ago.*

*Anyway, a small nitpick, but just getting a bigger horse, even with bigger bone, with the same size feet, actually makes the problem worse. I'm sure you know that, just pointing out that a lot of people don't, and (being a farrier, so feet are the first thing to come to mind... :>), it's one of*

*my pet peeves - a big guy will go for tall, sometimes muscular, occasionally will think of bone... but often buys a horse where the foot just looks like an extension of the diameter of the leg. All that does is put far more stress on the hoof, than having a smaller horse but with decent bone and foot size. You'd think it would be perfectly reasonable to interpolate from what you said in your article, to "bigger feet", but people don't.*

*Otherwise, I think it is an excellent article, and may direct customers to your site for informational purposes.*

*Cricket Cole*

A full book could be written on this topic and cover, age, each breed and many chapters on conformation.

