Finding your perfect saddle can feel like chasing a rainbow but various fitting systems claim to offer solutions...
Pressure mapping is the best way, he believes, to tailor the number of configurations to the rider. The fit looked at my overall position, including scanning my pedal stroke, via a Wattbike, for pedal stroke imbalances on each saddle, handlebar size and shape and stem alignment. "I produced pressure maps that showed where and how my pressure was distributed, alongside measures of stability through the pedal stroke," says Murphy. After testing numerous saddles, I settled on Selle Italia’s C1, a narrow 136mm-wide, slightly curved saddle with a narrow pressure relieving cut out that suited what Murphy said were my narrow pelvic bones.

"There isn’t a formula [to the process]," he says. "You really benefit from trying people on different shapes to find out which one is distributing pressure best.”

LETS HEAR IT

Where Royce Murphy favours a data-driven methodology, Andy Sexton of Bike Science in Bristol (bike-science.com) prefers rider feedback and trial and error.

In this free service (with a saddle purchase), he set me up on his fitting rig and tried ten saddles, all in pairs and each for a brief time (up to 30 seconds, long enough to form an opinion) in a variety of positions, asking me to pick a few from the two. These moved to a second round, where a ‘blind’ shotout whittled the selection down to two, which, if it was a customer, he’d send me out to road test. I opted to test the Fizik Antares, in the R1 large size (136mm width), because I was intrigued by the vast difference in the C2.

“It’s easy to be numbers driven,” says Sexton, “but when it comes to saddles the fitter has to make the final judgement.”

He too prefers to focus on positional factors first when it comes to saddle discomfort. “If your saddle is too high or too much saddle discomfort is inevitable,” he says. Like Murphy he encourages extensive real-world testing: “I often have clients who test a number of saddles for weeks, even months, before making a decision.”

GETTING FIZIK-AL

Selle Italia’s idmatch system is like being fitted for a saddle selected through Andy Sexton’s fit. As an 80kg rider, I was fitted for the Fizik Flite, a flat 145mm-wide model; L meant a large Antares, which is 152mm wide, as opposed to the 140mm regular size – the same saddle selected through Andy Sexton’s fit.

ID PARADE

Selle Italia’s idmatch system is like being fitted for a saddle selected through Andy Sexton’s fit. As a Snake, a flat saddle is selected – it’s Fizik’s recommendation for someone with high body flexibility and no pelvic rotation; L meant a large Antares, which is 152mm wide, as opposed to the 140mm regular size – the same saddle selected through Andy Sexton’s fit.

MEAT ON THE BONES

The focus of Specialized’s process is to measure sit bone width. You sit on a pedaled box for 30 seconds and lean forward with your back straight in an approximate riding position. The distance between indenteration is measured.

Saddle fit is one of the 15 steps in the company’s Body Geometry (BG) fit process and its ‘Fitting Feet Book’, used by all certified technicians, has this to say: “When a saddle is the wrong width (too narrow or too wide), the rider will often sit on one ischial tuberosity, twisting the spine in the process. Ideally [the saddle] would be installed during a big fit in order to ensure that whilst it might be the ideal saddle choice, it can be installed in the correct position as well.”

I didn’t go through the full fit process – I was using the fit from Royce Murphy as my default position – but talked through the options with Na Gharbasie, a fitter at Specialized’s Bristol Concept

SADDLE FIT

To use the app, you stand upright, place your phone on your chest and bend forwards. It rates you as a ‘Snake’ (high body flexibility and no pelvic rotation while pedalling – your pelvis stays in a neutral position), ‘Bull’ (low flexibility, high rotation) and ‘Chameleon’ (medium flexibility, low rotation).

As a Snake, a flat saddle is selected – it’s Fizik’s belief that the lack of pelvic rotation means your sit bones are in contact with the saddle and able to cope with the flat shape (close to rear). As a Bull it’s a curved saddle, to relieve pressure brought on by high rotation, and as a Chameleon, it’s something in between.

The app asks for your weight and speed on a flat road, which calculates your weight on the saddle and dictates the size required. As an 80kg saddle selection, ‘Chameleon’ and riding 31mph on the flat, it suggested a large Antares, which is 152mm wide, as opposed to the 140mm regular size – the same saddle selected through Andy Sexton’s fit.

TESTING TIMES

The five methods hadn’t produced a clear through-line; both Selle Italia had cut-outs; the Specialized had a cut-out and a groove; and the Fizik had neither. There was also huge variation in width, the Selle Italia C1 was the slightest at 136mm and the Fizik Antares was a huge 152mm, yet those two were the only ones selected by sitting on the bike.

To keep the test consistent, I used the bike set-up from my first visit with Murphy, along with the Trek Domane SLR 6 and kit choices, and rode each of the four saddles for around 150 miles across three separate rides, each 50 miles.

Results were mixed, but my saddle–sore problem looks to have been eliminated. Everyone I spoke to insisted how important it was to be set up correctly on the bike, and that goes some way to explaining this.

Of the four on test I’d happily eliminate two. The Selle Italia Flite Flite left me constantly agitating – there were pressure points I didn’t feel elsewhere. The Specialized Phantom, slightly narrower than the Flite Flite but more waved front to back, offered better results, even if it wasn’t a model I’d send to a client, with a hard and overly firm ride.

The Fizik’s selection, via Royce Murphy, was the Selle Italia C1, the narrowest and most generously padded saddle. Lab results were good, producing a map of contours and peaks, indicating low pressure. It felt good on the road, though it felt the Fizik Antares offered me more, and was a better ‘glove’ package of comfort and support.

Following testing, I met with Murphy again, bringing the Antares with me to see what results looked like through gobal4fit’s data. Data partially confirmed how I felt on the road,
showing an excellent pressure map, with lower peak pressures than the C2 and a 50:50 split between right and left legs while pedaling. It did identify marginally more rocking through the pedal stroke than the C2, the narrow width of which perhaps has the effect of wedging my sit bones in place. This was strange as in real-world testing I actually felt better supported on the Antares. The two I liked most were also the most different in terms of width, and shows that there’s far more to the equation than just size.

**RELIABLE SOURCE**

In the Antares, I believed I’d found a saddle worth sticking with. The question then was why some systems hadn’t produced an acceptable saddle and how reliable those that worked would be for other riders?

I contacted Oli Beckingsale, a former British Olympic cross-country racer who now co-owns Bristol bike shop BW Cycling (bwcycling.co.uk). Like Andy Sexton, he stocks saddles from an assortment of manufacturers and has the corresponding fitting paraphernalia. Like Sexton, he’s not really using them anymore though.

He prefers a rider feedback-driven approach in tandem with bike fit, believing that saddle fitting systems from the major manufacturers are exacerbating a problem in their attempts to solve it. Customers come in expecting it to be the answer to their prayers. They take a demo seat, then a week later they’re back, wanting a different one because it hasn’t worked.

“It’s hassle from the point of view of our business,” he says. “If someone wants saddle advice, we do it with a bike fit. Do it properly or they do it themselves, anywhere in the middle is messy.”

For Beckingsale, such systems are failing consumers. “The guys designing them are doing their best, but they’re trying to combine all their knowledge into a little box that allows someone to walk into a shop, be served by anyone and be given what they think is their perfect saddle.”

With what is often a minimum 30-day guarantee from manufacturers, “there’s nothing stopping them going through the whole range. It costs us time and money.” I spoke to renowned bike fitter and biomechanist Jon Iriberri, after reading his article on Cycling Industry news earlier this year. It was an interesting, and largely scathing, piece, aimed at the bike industry, and titled: ‘Bike Saddles: Does the industry want an easy answer to a complex problem?’ Yes, was his conclusion.

From a bike fitting point of view, in his opinion, “one-stop fitting systems” aren’t satisfactory because simplifying such a difficult problem is “almost absurdly reductionist.” “Every bike fitter knows they aren’t solutions,” Iriberri says. “[The fitters] cannot work in the guidelines of the brand because they know it’s more problematic than the keys they are given to solve the problem.” Fizik’s app falls under the label of what he’s rejecting, yet it did a job for me. Would it work for you? It would take a bigger sample size than one to make an assertion either way but it seems doubtful that it would reliably provide a solution. There are too many moving parts to be reconciled by a phone app.

Iriberri’s also sceptical, suggesting what it’s measuring is no greater than 15 per cent of the
information you need to successfully change a saddle. “Sometimes they work, sometimes they won’t” is his opinion on sizing systems.

Fizik’s method is a move from the focus on sit bone width and there’s something in it. But like Selle Italia’s idmatch and Specialized’s pad, Spine Concept Evo can only ever be a proxy, an off-bike estimate. How can they identify, for instance, the amount, density and placement of padding?

The gebioMized system is the most involved of the tech solutions I tried, offering information in an easy-to-digest way. It certainly advanced my understanding of what I should be looking for and where I need to be sitting.

Pressure mapping, Iriberri believes, has advanced understanding of how we fit to saddles and is the best thing we have right now, even if it’s imperfect in the lab. “There’s a lot of missing information [in the lab]. The way of pedalling on the road is not the same as in the studio (and) we think the information is poor compared to what’s possible outside”.

While Murphy can use gebioMized on the road (it uses Bluetooth, so he needs to be within 10m) Iriberri is working on developing new systems that measure pelvic movement in 3D on the road.

FEEL THE PRESSURE
It seems that pressure mapping is the best fitting system currently available. There are issues with it, like any bike fitting system it’s dependent on the skill of the fitter, while the lab setting cannot replicate how you interact with a saddle after five hours on uneven roads. But as a measure of where you’re sitting and how that pressure is distributed, there’s no better objective set-up.

As for ‘one-stop’ systems like Selle Italia, Specialized and Fizik, at best they’ll help to narrow down your options, when allied with a full fit, but on their own shouldn’t be used to dictate choice.

The on-bike trial and error approach casts the net wide and lets you decide which saddle feels best. Like Andy Sexton says, it’s easy to be blinded by numbers: “There are so many factors that go into choosing the right saddle that to focus on any particular metric or electronic system can be misleading. Given enough opportunity and time to try out a range of shapes and styles, most riders can identify what will work for them.”

That said, not everyone will know automatically whether what they are feeling is right or wrong. Many people put up with pain because they don’t know any other way. Sores, numbness and pain isn’t normal and can all be corrected, providing you’re on the right size bike.

The C2 and the Antares were good fits – subjectively and objectively, though neither was perfect - and cleared up the problems I was having. The pursuit for perfection, when it comes to this complex problem, might be an impossible chase. Sometimes it’s fine to fall short.