

Aftermarket Saddles

OVER 80 PERCENT of the motorcycles entered in the 2011 Iron Butt Rally were equipped with aftermarket seats, and for good reason. Few original equipment saddles are comfortable for long-distance riding. Original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) seem to be more focused on seats that look good and feel soft when they are tried out on the showroom floor. To be comfortable for long-distance, saddles generally need to be wider and more supportive, especially at the widest part of the saddle. A pocket to sit in also works better for long distance than a relatively flat or, worse yet, rounded top.

About half of the aftermarket saddles used in the 2011 Iron Butt Rally were made by Russell Cycle Products (www. day-long.com). Collectively, over 70% of the aftermarket saddles used in the IBR were built by either Russell, Rick Mayer (www.rickmayercycle.com), or Bill Mayer (www.billmayersaddles.com). All three of these products are produced in California and they share a common history.

The Mayer Family Dynasty

The Russell "Day-Long" saddle was invented by Bill Mayer in the 1970s. It has a unique design that incorporates a lateral spring to support the rider's weight resting on the "wings" of the saddle at its widest point. Bill Mayer sold the rights to produce the Day-Long saddle to Don Russell in the mid-1980s. After Don Russell's death, his wife Donna eventually sold the business to its current owner, who operates using the Russell name out of Shasta Lake, California.

Bill Mayer's two sons, Bill Mayer III and Rick Mayer, eventually went into business for themselves building custom saddles without the spring suspension system (which neither of them believe is necessary). Bill ("Rocky") Mayer operates out of Ojai, California (west of Los Angeles) and Rick Mayer's shop is in Anderson, California, not far from Shasta Lake. All three companies build saddles with "wings."

As explained on Russell's website: "The wide 'wings' are there to provide outer buttock support so that less body weight will be concentrated toward the center." While Russell uses a spring to support weight placed on the wings, Bill Mayer replaces most of the stock foam with a molded foam cushion with wings. Rick Mayer removes some of the stock foam, glues foam blocks onto the remaining foam, and then forms the wings by hand, carving away parts of the added foam with an electric knife. He also makes other modifications described in more detail below.

Options to Consider

Over the years, I've tried a variety of aftermarket saddles, including Russell saddles on four different model BMWs, Corbin saddles on three different BMWs and a Gold Wing, and a Bill "Rocky" Mayer saddle on a BMW. The Russell saddles and the Corbin saddles are at opposite ends of the spectrum with respect to cushioning they provide.

My Russell saddles not only had relatively soft foam, the spring provides even more cushioning. In contrast, the Corbin saddles have very little cushioning. The foam is relatively dense and there is not much of it. The very firm feel of the Corbin saddles probably explains why they aren't as popular with the long-distance riding community as the saddles built by Russell and the Mayer brothers.

All of the Russell saddles I've owned have truly been "Day-Long" comfort-



able. But, despite the lack of cushioning, all of the Corbin saddles I've owned have also been extremely comfortable for long-distance riding. The secret to the Corbin saddles comfort is their shape. Instead of building saddles on a stock seat pan, Corbin designs a custom seat pan with a nicely shaped "bucket." They work for me.

The photographs below show examples of how radically different the shape of a custom Corbin saddle can be from the stock saddle. The Corbin saddle shown in the picture was done during a "ride-in" appointment and is slightly wider than the standard Corbin saddle for the F650/800GS BMW.

My First Rick Mayer Saddle

Since Corbin has not yet designed a saddle for the new BMW K1600GT, I recently decided to give Rick Mayer a try when I took delivery of one of the first K1600GTs sold in the U.S. To maximize the chances of getting the best fit possible, I scheduled a "ride-in" appointment to have the saddle built while I waited. I was especially interested in doing the ride-in because I knew this would be the first saddle Rick Mayer had done for a K1600GT. Although the saddle could have been modified based on photographs, it was helpful for Rick to be able to see me sitting on the bike using the stock saddle. By seeing me on the stock

saddle, Rick was able to determine exactly where to locate the "wings" of the modified saddle and how wide to make them.

The first step in the modification process involved removing the stock seat cover and carefully isolating the heating elements so that they could be re-installed on top the modified seat. Next, the stock seat foam was removed from the sides of the saddle and large blocks of a higher density foam were glued in place. Rick also removed a section of foam from the very center of the saddle where the two pressure points

BMW F650/800GS Saddles — Stock (left) and Custom Corbin Saddle



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Rick Mayer Customizes a K1600GT Saddle.

Seth Laam Checks a Pattern for a New Leather Cover.

would be and replaced it with a block of his own foam that he cuts grooves in.

The real artwork involved in the process is the shaping of the added foam with electric knives and grinders. As shown in the accompanying photo, Rick shapes the top of the saddle with a grinder, forming a slight pocket.

Before a new cover is fabricated, the modified saddle goes back on the bike for a trial sitting. With each of the Russell saddles I've had made, this is the point where I find out that the seat needs to be raised in the front. But Rick got it just right on the first try. I declined the offer to take the bike out for a test ride and Rick's assistant Seth Laam proceeded to make a custom black leather cover. Seth, who does really beautiful work, also replaced the cover on the pillion seat with black leather.

As shown in the accompanying photos, the new saddle is a couple of inches wider toward the back but just as narrow in the front. The change is just as noticeable riding on it. It still feels as soft as the stock saddle, but it's much more supportive and has no hot spots. Thousand mile days are going to be no problem on the Rick Mayer saddle.

Rick Mayer has recently cut his prices by \$100 bring his prices well below those of his principal competitors. The basic charge for one of Rick's solo saddles is \$319. Leather is an extra \$100, more if the pillion is also recovered in leather. With the 10% discount offered to Iron Butt Association members, you can have a solo saddle covered in premium leather for less than \$400, and that includes retention of the OEM heating element. In terms of the benefits provided per dollar spent, that's a bargain.



Stock (Left) vs. Rick Mayer Saddle for the K1600GT.