

The Hartco Pro Tour Saddle

By Nick Hoppner

This product report is a four-year update of a similar one published in 2006.

Sometimes we buy a product in hopes it will give service for a long time.

I'm here to tell you that the Hartco Pro Tour saddle I put on my 2004 GL1800 over 20,000 miles ago continues to deliver and impress. If anything, it's even better today than when it was brand new out of the box.

What Led Us to Consider a Custom Seat

For those readers who don't recall my original report on the Hartco Pro Tour, allow me to explain the rationale and process of buying a custom-fit saddle. Shortly after buying our GL1800, I knew my wife Ginny was less than satisfied with Honda's stock saddle. She mentioned that the angle of the backrest was uncomfortable on her lower back during all-day rides. Then she started stuffing a bed pillow behind her whenever we rode. Not only was this a visual contradiction of Honda's much-vaunted reputation as the most comfortable luxury tourer on the highways, but it smacked a bit of the Beverly Hillbillies' junk-filled jalopy.

Later on, somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 miles on my white Wing's odometer, I noticed I was increasingly dissatisfied with my own section of the stock saddle. Not only had the natural padding in my own bony backside gotten thinner with time, but so had the padding in the stock saddle. I noticed my butt was getting fatigued—achy—crampy toward the end of each 120- to 200-mile segment of the cross-country rides to Wing Ding. Then too, the sciatic nerve in my right leg was burning—presumably from excess pressure.

So, at Wing Ding several years ago, I mentioned our complaints about the aging stock saddle and our symptoms of prolonged riding on it. Mark Hart, owner of Hartco International, explained a lot in a few minutes.

First off, he informed us, Honda builds its stock saddles to be comfortable to the largest group of potential buyers of their motorcycles—inevitably making them for the masses, not for the individual owner. Honda also builds their saddles to keep both component costs and weights to a minimum. To be sure, Honda does a doggone good job of making the stock Gold Wing saddles showroom comfortable. The rub comes as the total avoirdupois of Momma and Poppa have compressed that showroom comfort over time and mileage.

Honda also designs its Gold Wing saddles to suit a generalized guesstimate as to the height, shape, and size of its customers, as well as their preferred riding postures. As a result, the stock saddle allows for generous roominess fore and aft, and promotes the semi-relaxed, leaning-back posture encouraged by use of rider and passenger highway boards. That posture is widely disparaged by motorcyclists of other persuasions as the "Barcalounger slouch".

Choosing Our Customized Saddle

The virtue of a custom saddle is that it can be made to measure. At that Wing Ding, Mark jotted down Ginny's and my heights, weights, and inseam measurements. From these, he could shape the saddle's "butt pockets" to fit our measurements. He also

noted our medical histories and adjusted the height of the edge of the rider's pocket to shift the support area to protect my sciatic nerve (damaged when I crushed a vertebral disk years before). He wanted to know if we used highway pegs or boards (no) or a heel-toe shifter (no), as either of these preferences leads to different ergonomics.

To illustrate, he perched us on an iron frame-supported Pro Tour in the middle of the Wing Ding show floor. Even though the demo saddle was far from a custom fit, we could both tell the Pro Tour saddle was more supportive than the stock saddle—the seating position was more upright and the dished-out "butt pockets" provided firmer support from all sides. I sensed immediately that the majority of my body weight was now supported by my leg muscles instead of my pelvis. Ginny immediately remarked that the different angle of the passenger backrest eliminated the pesky "hot spot" she'd experienced in her lower back.

We selected a conservative looking, nubby, light gray fabric with pink and blue undertones for the upholstery. Fabric tends to be warmer in cold weather and cooler under the hot sun. Vinyl is also available.

A month or two after we ordered the saddle, the Pro Tour arrived from Hartco. Installation was simple enough, albeit a bit snug fitting. With the optional driver backrest, the Hartco weighed 24.5 lbs, a full 8 1/2 pounds more than the stock saddle (without rider backrest). Much of this is due to the solid fiberglass pan and steel backrest components. Also, the viscoelastic memory foam in the Hartco saddle is considerably denser than the stock saddle's padding.

The Road Test and Beyond

Immediately, Ginny and I both could tell this saddle fit us like a well-tailored suit of clothes. And as the miles added up, the fit held up, too. My riding position was a tad closer to the bars, reducing arm stretch and that nagging little burn in my shoulder and neck muscles. Ginny's backseat riding position was now upright and roomy enough for her to even do some yogic leg stretches as we'd drone along the interstates.

I figure we now have about 20,000 miles on the Hartco Pro Tour. The sun has faded the upholstery colors a bit (but it still looks great), and there's a small grease spot on one seam I just never get around to removing. (Yes, a little spot cleaner would do the trick!) As for the ride, it just stays impressive. This is one comfortable saddle—its reliable support lasts all day long, no matter how many miles you ride.

Amazingly, the fabric upholstery does not get waterlogged in a downpour. It towel dries quickly, and there is a shower-cap-style cover you can pull on if going inside a restaurant on a showery day.

Over time, I've noticed a couple of aspects of this saddle (or any other custom saddle) the prospective buyer may want to know about. While most touring riders stay planted on their saddles, more aggressive riders who consciously shift their body weight across the saddle when cornering may find the contoured "butt pockets" of a custom saddle less easy to slide across. Likewise, fabric upholstery creates more friction than vinyl, thus impeding weight shifting somewhat. (At track schools that teach increased lean angles during cornering, many riders use talcum powder on their bike's saddles to reduce sideways friction.) If you're a hard-charging rider, Hartco can shape the saddle to suit your style of cornering.

Consider also the net effect of adding 8 1/2 pounds to your Wing. The bike will feel heavier when you raise it onto the center stand or lift it off the side stand. And you must take that added weight into consideration when you calculate the weight of what you're packing.

There's another reality to consider, too. Suppose your personal size, shape, and weight have changed so that you don't fit the custom saddle as well as you used to. Fortunately, Hartco can modify your custom saddle to fit your new configuration.

Closing Thoughts

A word about cost. As ordered, our Hartco saddle cost more than \$1,000. For some budgets, that's a reach. But whenever you buy anything custom-tailored, you should be prepared to pay more than "one-size-fits-none" prices. And anybody who's spent more than an hour on a commercial airline's coach class seat knows how uncomfortable a squashed-down seat can be. If you are a serious Goldwinger, who wants to spend days in the saddle of your favorite bike, give serious consideration to upgrading your bike with a saddle that actually fits you and your co-rider's shapes and weights.

Tucked away in my shed is my carefully boxed up, original stock saddle. If or when I sell my GL1800, I'll put the stock saddle back on the bike and keep my Pro Tour. Will it fit another GL1800? Sure! Will it fit the next generation Gold Wing that comes along? We'll see. My bet is that Mark Hart will cross that bridge when we all come to it.

Obviously, no saddle will eliminate the natural fatigue that comes from sitting too long. Muscular and skeletal fatigue is your body's warning that it's time to stop, stretch, and walk around a little.

Hartco makes a Pro Tour for every model of Gold Wing—from the 1975 GL1000 to the newest GL1800. Hartco also makes saddles for a wide variety of sport bikes and cruisers, as well as a line of lambskin, vinyl, and velour seat covers and matching dash covers. Need a special application backrest? Just ask.

To learn more about their products, visit hartcoseats.com on the internet, or write to Hartco International, 2288 S. Highway 17, Crescent City, Florida 32112 or phone (800) 446-7772 or (386) 698-4668. Even better, call or web surf over to Hartco to learn which motorcycle rallies Hartco will attend this season. Sit on a Hartco yourself. Ask questions. Feel the difference. The Hartco Pro Tour Saddle is a long-lasting and infinitely satisfying long-distance touring saddle. You've got my word on it!

