

ISM Adamo Time Trial and Racing 2 Saddles: The Triathlon Saddle Evolved.

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By Tom Demerly for JustTriTalk.com



ISM's Time Trial (top) and Racing 2 are among the most popular choices for increased saddle comfort in the aero position.

If the nose of the saddle hurts you, remove it. That is the apparent logic behind **ISM's triathlon saddles**.

Because that logic is good ISM is the most popular independent brand of saddles for triathletes. If you use the Kona Bike Count published by LAVA magazine as a barometer ISM trumps 23 other brands on the number of saddles ridden at Kona in 2012. Fully 21% of the bikes on the pier in Kona used an **ISM brand** saddle in 2012, the highest number of any independent saddle brand not commonly included as original equipment on a new tri bike. This metric is more significant than earning the number one spot on the saddle count, which belongs to **Fizik** in 2012. Fizik has more dealers than ISM and is original equipment on some popular bike brands like Cervelo. Consumers have to buy an ISM saddle as an aftermarket upgrade and they aren't inexpensive. But triathlon cyclists have voted with their dollars: despite relatively high cost and a small dealer network triathletes seek out and gladly pay for **ISM saddles**. There are reasons for that.



If the nose of the saddle is uncomfortable: remove it. The ISM saddles we reviewed were shorter than a conventional road saddle, part of what makes them work.

The ISM saddles we review here, the ISM Adamo Racing 2 with its blunt nose as viewed from the side and the **ISM Adamo Time Trial** with its more tapered nose as seen from the side are typical of the ISM approach to saddle design. They remove the forward 3-5 centimeters of a conventional saddle's narrow nose and replace it with two more comfortable protrusions. These two forward protrusions provide support for rider weight and allow circulation to soft tissues in the saddle area. The most obvious result is greater comfort, less pressure and no numbness.

A secondary benefit is better performance since the rider can rotate their pelvis farther forward into what is likely a more aerodynamic posture and then maintain that posture for a longer time without having to sit upright to relieve saddle pressure. Since the primary source of aerodynamic drag on the bike is the rider the benefit may be so significant it could be compared to the time savings from a \$2500 pair of race wheels, simply by maintaining a better aerodynamic posture longer.



Subtle differences in the shape of the nose on the ISM Adamo Racing 2 (left) and the ISM Adamo Time Trial offer good alternatives to find the perfect fit for each rider.

ISM currently offers 13 different saddle models. Each one has the unique nose-less design with two forward supports. They range from the original ISM Touring Saddle, a wide pedestrian saddle to the new performance oriented ISM Attack road racing saddle. The different models are differentiated by shape, width, length and materials. Our ISM Adamo Racing 2 and **ISM Adamo Time Trial** are two of the most popular models for triathletes riding in the aero position.

A key factor in getting the most comfort and performance from the ISM saddles is setting them adjusted optimally. Fit and position for these saddles is different than a traditional racing saddle. As ISM's Operations Commander Dave Bunce told us, "With an ISM saddle you sit on top of the saddle, not around it." Bunce hosted an excellent fit tutorial for Adamo saddles here:

The first difference in saddle set up is overall saddle height. You will set up an ISM Adamo saddle lower than a conventional saddle. When I positioned my test saddles I found my saddle height went from 70.6 cm measured center of crank to top center of saddle to 69.1 cm. I dropped my saddle 1.5 cm, a little less than what Bunce suggested I may need to. Bunce mentioned most riders reduce their saddle height from 2-5 cm when transitioning to an ISM Adamo.



ISM packaging provides an excellent guide to fitting a new ISM saddle. Most riders will need to lower their seatpost with an ISM and find the appropriate angle and fore/aft position.

The second step in adjusting the ISM Adamo saddles for optimal comfort is setting the fore/aft position and saddle angle. In the triathlon position a rider is supposed to have their pelvis rotated more forward than on a road bike with an open angle between the torso and femur bone. This facilitates better comfort, better body aerodynamics and, according to studies such as the Ian Garside study cited by tri bike inventor Dan Empfield, better run performance after cycling. As a result of this forward pelvic rotation the ischial tuberosities or “sit bones” do not sit on the saddle the way they do on a road bike. Instead they are angled slightly rearward. The ISM Adamo saddles are designed to accommodate this forward rotated pelvic posture.

To accommodate this forward pelvic rotation the ISM Adamo saddles I tested needed to be slid farther back than a conventional saddle. This is somewhat counterintuitive since conventional triathlon positioning usually includes the saddle being moved forward to induce a steeper effective seat tube angle. With the ISM Adamo the saddle is positioned more rearward to eliminate pressure and facilitate optimal forward pelvic angle with no saddle pressure on the nose. While counterintuitive, it works. Once I slide the ISM Adamo rearward my pelvis rotated naturally and comfortably forward, reducing strain on my lower back and easing the reach to my aerobars. The change may be significant enough to cause some riders to consider a longer stem since the forward pelvic rotation and resultant flatter torso elongates the reach dimension.



You can see the difference in the shape of the nose on the ISM Adamo Racing 2 (left) and the Time Trial. If the nose protrusions are asymmetrical they can easily be bent into place.

Once the ISM Adamo Racing 2 was mounted and adjusted correctly it was time for a ride. I've tried ISM saddles before but never with the counsel of Mr. Dave Bunce to help me with the set-up. Dave's insights, the same ones on the back of the saddle packaging, are very valuable to optimizing the performance of these saddles. The **ISM Adamo Racing 2** instantly eliminates conventional saddle pressure. That's no surprise since the general configuration is so different compared to a conventional saddle. I did rotate my pelvis farther forward with no pressure in the center crotch area where you get conventional saddle hot spots. That's not to say there isn't any pressure at all though. On an **ISM Adamo Racing 2** the pressure is moved from the center of the crotch to two distinct locations about where my femurs left my pelvis. A little more adjusting, angling the saddle slightly more downward (maybe a degree...) and scooting it back a trifle and there was the sweet spot. Initially the saddle "horns" felt apparent. The adjustments improved that.

I did notice the forward supports on the **ISM Adamo Racing 2** were not symmetrical as viewed from the front initially. One side was higher than the other (see "A" in the photo above). I carefully cold-set (polite word for "bent") the saddle protrusions by grabbing them and bending them into place. It worked perfectly. This suggests the saddle's ability to adapt to asymmetrical pressure. After riding a while you may notice the forward protrusions aren't symmetrical. This is most likely because you aren't symmetrical either and the saddle has adjusted to accommodate your anatomy. Conventional saddles won't do that to this degree.



I noticed the slight difference in silhouette between the ISM Adamo Time Trial (top) and the ISM Adamo Racing 2. Both are good, I liked the Time Trial version best.

When I moved on to the ISM Adamo Time Trial, I found the very slightly shorter length and more rounded nose silhouette was more to my liking. I already knew how to adjust the saddle from my first rides with the ISM Adamo Racing 2 and duplicated that saddle height, fore/aft position and saddle angle on the ISM Adamo Time Trial. Saddles can be an individual choice for many people, and I liked the ISM Adamo Racing 2 but loved the ISM Time Trial for its more sculpted, less blunt nose shape. The ISM Adamo Time Trial is my favorite of the two saddles.



You can see the slightly more tapered nose on the ISM Adamo Time Trial (left) and the more blunt nose on the ISM Adamo Racing 2 (right).

For someone who has over 30 years riding on a conventional saddle with a forward protruding nose the ISM Adamos produce an initial sensation of “falling off the front”. This is offset by the greatly improved comfort and you adapt to this as your torso settles into a more relaxed, flatter posture with no bend in your lower back. The overall result is much better comfort, not only in the saddle/crotch area but also in the lower back. For riders accustomed to a conventional saddle it feels unusual at first but the benefits are worth a few rides to acclimate. Once I found the “sweet spot” with the ISM Adamo Time Trial it is, indeed, very sweet.

“Once I found the sweet spot with the ISM Adamo Time Trial saddle it is, indeed, very sweet.”

An added benefit to the shorter ISM Adamo saddles is improved climbing performance. Especially with the 30 cm extra-long Profile Tri Stryke and Fizik Arione Tri saddles the nose of the saddle tends to hit you between the thighs when you rock your bike back and forth between your legs when you climb out of the saddle standing up on the pedals. The nose of the ISM Adamo Time Trial and Racing 2 are fully 5 cm farther back than the Tri Stryke and Arione and maybe even farther than that depending on your adjustment of the saddle fore/aft position. That leaves plenty of room for climbing out of the saddle.

A third benefit from the ISM Adamo saddle design, one that may not transfer to everyone, was easier transition from cycling to running. Since my lower back was less strained with the ISM Adamo saddle from my pelvis being rotated farther forward my back felt fresher and less tight running off the bike. This is a welcome benefit.



The ISM saddles we tested were moderate weight, not super light but not much heavier than comparable OEM conventional saddles.

For those concerned with component weight the news is good. The ISM Adamo Time Trial and **Racing 2** saddles are not ultra-lightweight, but weigh less than many conventional road saddles like the San Marco Rolls at 365 grams and the popular Profile Tri Stryke triathlon saddle at about 305 grams claimed weight. They do weigh more than very lightweight conventional road saddles that are often below 200 grams. I'll suggest your saddle is not a great place to concentrate on weight savings. Comfort and the ability to maintain a good aero posture will make you faster than a saddle that is a couple ounces lighter.

The saddle rails on the ISM Adamo Time Trial are titanium alloy and standard dimensions to fit every seat post clamp, an important factor with so many model specific seat posts being included on aero bikes now. The total weight of the titanium railed ISM Adamo Time Trial is 267 grams according to our scale. The ISM Adamo Racing 2 also uses titanium alloy rails but came in at 293 grams measured weight on our scales, perhaps in part because of the more built-up nose area.



Both the ISM Adamo Time Trial and Racing 2 have a convenient transition hook to rack your bike by the saddle in the transition area if you don't have a saddle bag or rear hydration unit.

If there is one option I'd ask for from ISM it would be the choice of a slightly longer saddle to try. They've provided that with their ISM Adamo Attack saddle, a slim, full length 27 cm long saddle aimed at the road market more so than the triathlon cyclist. It's unlikely I'd need the additional length, but ISM offers the choice for traditionalists who feel they need something a little longer. After riding the 25 cm +/- Adamo Time Trial and Racing 2 I don't know that I'd be compelled to switch to the longer Adamo Attack, but the option may be interesting to taller riders who may want more fore/aft adjustment.

The two saddles I tried both had an interesting transition hook built onto the rear of the saddle for holding your bike on a transition rack. This is a nice idea but may interfere with some rear mount hydration systems so double check this before you try to combine the two.

ISM saddles are often recommended to people who have chronic saddle discomfort. They usually always work for even the most saddle-sensitive rider. The missing story to me was the improvement in lower back posture and potentially in body aerodynamics from a better position on the bike and the ability to stay comfortable in the aero position longer. These benefits make ISM not only a comfort upgrade, but a potential performance upgrade as well. With these potential benefits and the compelling case made by the number of athletes, including pros and large numbers of age groupers, it seems like the ISM saddles are absolutely worth trying to see if they make you faster.



The ISM Adamo Time Trial (left) and Racing 2 (right).