

# One Horse's Pain is Many Horses' Gain

By Schleese courtesy of Saddlefit 4 Life

Jochen Schleese has accomplished many things and acquired many titles: Certified Master Saddler, German National Riding School instructor, founder of Schleese Saddlery Service Ltd. and Saddlefit 4 Life Inc. and he's an active member of many efforts to educate the horse owning public on the importance of good saddle fit. He has been recognized with many industry and business awards over the 25 years he has been in business, and has been profiled in the *Wall Street Journal* and twice on the *Discovery Channel*.

He owes many of these accomplishments, in part, to his experiences with his horse, Pirat, with whom he qualified for the 1984 European Championships as a member of the young rider's eventing team for Germany. Shortly after qualifying, Jochen had to retire the Hanoverian gelding for lameness. It was the end of his riding career but the catalyst for something that has benefited thousands of horses and riders: Saddlefit 4 Life.

"After placing in the German nationals in 1982, Pirat began showing signs of lameness, which at the time I did not attribute to the saddle since I was surrounded by experts – vets, trainers, farriers, who all had a job of keeping us fit for the team," Jochen recalls. "When I think of the remedial applications we used in an attempt to ward off the lameness, including blocking, blistering, re-shoeing and all sorts of pharmaceuticals, I could cry.

"I know now it was simply the fact that the construction of my saddle was not in keeping with the requirements of the horse," he continues. "With every step his shoulders were hit by forward facing tree points, the too-narrow gullet impacted his spinal processes, ligaments and nerves along his back, and the gullet plate likely pinched him and impeded his wither muscle as he tried to jump and move. I had followed the advice of the experts, but the result was a 'textbook case' of torture for my poor horse."

Pirat's experience shaped Jochen's future as he gravitated to saddle making. "It is my life goal and my passion to make a

difference by educating riders to help them find optimal saddle solutions for comfort, performance and equine development." That goal led him to form Saddlefit 4 Life in 2005. It has since evolved into an educational endeavor designed to bring all contributors to a horse's well being to the same understanding of how saddle fit impacts the horse and rider.

Saddlefit 4 Life educates everyone from the leisurely rider to the intense competitor and all types of equine professionals including veterinarians, farriers, trainers and retailers. Its ever-evolving body of knowledge comes from constant sharing and comparing of information. That collective expertise is spread through three levels of saddle fit training and certification offered to equine professionals in all fields. Saddlefit 4 Life courses even count for U.S. Dressage Federation University credits. Seminars, workshops and individual consultations are additional formats for spreading these ideas to amateurs and professionals. As the leading organization dedicated to training in saddle fit evaluation, analysis and diagnosis of saddle fit issues, S4L is making inroads into every aspect of the equestrian community.

## No Secrets

There is no secret to good saddle fit, says Jochen. "It all comes down to making sure the saddle does not hit your horse's negative reflex points." The negative reflex points are the points where pressure or a sudden impact will trigger a response from the muscle, Jochen explains. In saddle fit, the muscles in question are the five back muscles under the saddle. If any part of the saddle hits the origin or insertion point of these muscles, it prompts a reaction that is rarely what the rider wants. Bucking is an extreme example. More typical responses are performance issues, like a horse that won't get round in flat work or over fences or doesn't use his shoulders well over fences. Behaviors that can range from refusing jumps to having a bad attitude are other common symptoms of poor saddle fit.

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## Vice-Grip of the Saddle

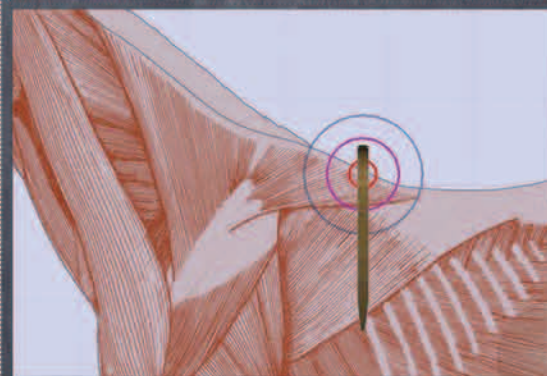
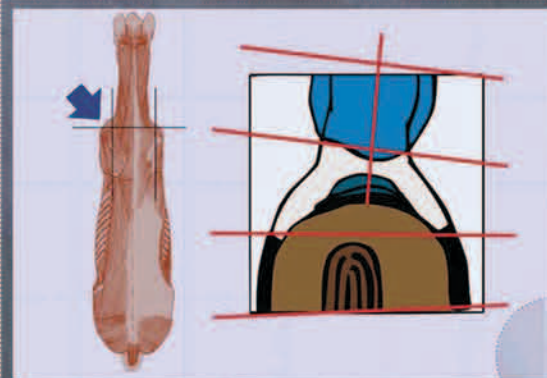
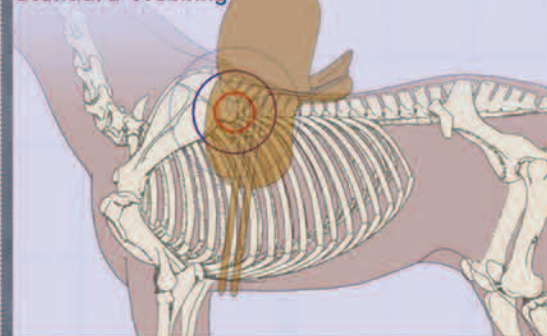


Saddle to the Right

Saddle to the Left

Saddle Straight  
rider's hip  
dropped

## Standard Webbing



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Saddlefit 4 Life has a simple diagnostic test to determine whether a saddle is hitting any of these points, both when the horse is standing still and, very importantly, when he is at work with the rider on board. "You draw a little map on your horse's back, using white chalk to indicate where the saddle should be and red on the reflex points where the saddle should not be. If the saddle does not make contact with any of those red marks then you are home free," Jochen explains.

In travelling the world talking about saddle fit, Jochen often encounters surprise that such a simple idea is so often overlooked by so many. He believes this is because saddle making became a lost art after the industrial revolution. Before that, military officers and cowboys knew how to take care of their horses and adjust the saddles accordingly because these horses had to stay sound in order to work. It's only in the last 50-70 years that that knowledge has been mostly lost. Noting that there are very few saddle makers in his father's generation, Jochen asks: "Who would have thought they'd be making saddles for a living?"

"If it wasn't for veterinarians and veterinary science that can show us what saddles do and don't do, we wouldn't be where we are today." Not everybody is thrilled about the rediscovery of this knowledge, Jochen notes. Accounting for negative reflex points is not always compatible with making lots of saddles at a low price, thus there's been some ruffled feathers in the industry, he says.

Educated amateur owners, however, are no match for disgruntled saddle makers. When a rider's wits-end frustration intersects with an educational S4L presentation, article or YouTube video, "There's an 'Oh my God, this is my horse!' moment when they get really mad and become determined to find equipment that won't hurt their horse." As more riders have that epiphany, it's unlikely the industry will return to the era when saddle fit was rarely considered a source of soundness, performance and/or attitude issues.

"I want to create a universal language for the whole equine industry," says Jochen. The main message is that riding shouldn't hurt the horse or the rider and that is accomplished by one simple thing: "Stay off the negative reflex points."



*Jochen Schleese visits the West Coast frequently and is expected to be part of HIPPOH (Horse Industry Professionals Protecting Our Horses) Foundation's Circle of Influence symposium in Los Angeles County's Palos Verdes on May 6-8. Brought to you by Schleese - The Female Saddle Specialist, courtesy of Saddlefit 4 Life. [www.saddlesforwomen.com](http://www.saddlesforwomen.com), [info@schleese.com](mailto:info@schleese.com).*



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