



SCHLEESE SADDLERY SERVICE, LTD.

Pioneering company tackles the tough stuff.

Crotch comfort is not a subject everybody wants to talk about. Even in our modern world, there are women who ride in pain and don't seek help, assuming that bruising, chafing and sometimes even bleeding in their intimate area is something that simply must be endured.

It drives Sabine Schleese nuts.

Sabine is Managing Director of Schleese Saddlery Service, Ltd, which she runs with her husband, Certified Master Saddler and horseman Jochen Schleese and their partner, CEO Earl Rothery. The Schleeses started the Ontario, Canada-based enterprise in 1986 with the idea of being a full-service saddle company. As they gained their customers' trust, however, they soon identified a recurring complaint from the gender that, ironically, constitutes the majority of the North American equestrian public.

Jochen recalls clients telling him they were advised to "suck it up" by their trainers when they shared their discomfort. The comment came from male and female coaches. The male trainers, Jochen suspects, simply could not empathize and the female trainers were likely brought up in "old school" riding systems that did not encourage complaints or challenging the status quo. "Many simply didn't know what they didn't know and didn't realize that there could be an alternative," Jochen notes.

Early on, Schleese Saddlery set about becoming that alternative. Schleese adopted "The Female Saddle Specialist" as much more than a marketing motto. Its extensive and ever-evolving line of saddles for dressage, jumping and english and

by Kim F. Miller



western trail riders all feature the patented "crotch comfort" system.

Many of Schleese's 13 saddle models are designed for the female body. Extended stirrup bars allow for the longer femur of a woman in comparison to the lower leg and a narrow twist, which accommodates for the angle of the female hip and gives a spot for the inner thigh to sit close to the horse. A wider, extra soft seat allows room for the female's seat bones, typically wider than a male's, while a variety of flap angles accommodate many different thigh and hip alignments. The crotch comfort system includes a padded cut-out in the seat and foam inserts that relieve any pressure or rubbing there. The net effect is that riders can concentrate on their position and their horse, not their pain.

Obvious But Overlooked Idea

In a 1989 *Equus* article by Dr. Deb Bennett, Ph.D, the author explains that the world's earliest horse cultures built saddles differently for men and women. Simple pelvic anatomy explains why this is important. The hip sockets, lower back, seat bones and the position of the pubic bone in men and women align and function very differently. A higher-set "pubic symphysis" is the first reason men can sit comfortably and attain a great position in a saddle that may be excruciating and more hindrance than help to a woman. The pubic symphysis is the cartilage joint that unites the upper ends of the left and right pubic bones.

Saddles made for men are typically built wider in the crotch area and narrower in the seat, exactly the opposite of how women are built: narrow in the crotch and wider in the seat. This leads to discomfort and, equally important, an ineffective riding position.

Because a man's hip sockets generally face more forward than a woman's, it is easier for him to place his inner thigh flat against the saddle. The ability to do so positively influences his upper body position and enables his leg to hang down in an ideal position. A woman's pelvic alignment gives her thighbones a tendency to slant in from the hips to knees, making it more difficult to draw her knees

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back and the leg down without hollowing her back. These are just a few of many anatomical reasons why a saddle made for her form is critical to the female rider's comfort and effectiveness.

Sabine and her partners are proud of being the Female Saddle Specialists, but that accomplishment is just one of many successful and ongoing efforts to make riding more enjoyable, effective and healthy for horse and rider.

Patented in 1996, the *AdapTree*® adjustable saddle tree that Jochen invented enables Schleese clients to have their saddles adjusted to fit new horses, or the changing shape of their existing equine partner. More recently, Jochen initiated the Saddlefit 4 Life® network. This consortium of equine experts contributes their knowledge to make sure that today's saddle fit thinking embraces the latest in the always-growing fields of horse and human anatomy and equine behavior.

Local Demand

The popularity of Schleese's saddles and saddle fitting services is evidenced locally by the hiring of a full-time saddle fitter in Southern California. Lifelong horsewoman Karen Loshbaugh signed on to the position in July and has been kept quite busy, almost too busy to ride any of the horses in her and her husband's Rancho Santa Fe dressage training business, Art To Ride.

Loshbaugh first came to Schleese as a client frustrated by five years worth of unsuccessful suggestions for fixing a fitting issue with her FEI dressage mount. She even went to the manufacturer of her previous saddle to learn how to adjust the flocking herself, but that didn't help.

Loshbaugh learned about Schleese through the documentary *If Horses Could Speak*. Produced by *Tug Of War: Classical Versus "Modern" Dressage* author Dr. Gerd Heuschmann, *If Horses Could Speak* includes a segment in which Jochen addresses the impact of saddle fit on the horse's well-being and performance.

"Schleese said they could fix the problem and I didn't believe them," Loshbaugh recalls of her first encounter with the company. "But the difference their saddle made was unbelievable. Every horse that we put under one of their saddles had a similar transformation and I was sold."

Although she'd been a rider for 40 years, Loshbaugh confesses she'd not learned much about saddle fit and its importance before finding Schleese. Now, her background as a trainer and a trained saddle fitter enables her to spot from the rail a rider struggling against her saddle. For example, if the saddle's twist is too wide, the rider will often sit back so they can close their leg better, she notes.

In addition to the seemingly magical effect of the Schleese saddles, on horses and riders, the company's commitment to both was a major attraction for Loshbaugh. "They put a ton back into research and development, even when the result is the expense of changing a design," she observes. "They go above and beyond in educating themselves and I respect that. They are not just cranking out saddles that sell."

Saddle fitting appointments are detailed affairs

that begin with the fitter watching the horse and rider at work. The process continues with an extensive measurement procedure for horse and rider. Loshbaugh travels regularly between San Diego, north to Ventura County and all points in between. Schleese had been filling Southern California fitting requests visits from Jochen Schleese, until demand warranted the full-time post. Central California fittings are accommodated by Matt and Deb Hirons and Northern California appointments are fulfilled by veteran dressage trainer Christiane Noelting. Schleese representatives can also be found at various competitions and equine expos in the region.

German dressage gold and bronze Olympic medalist Heike Kemmer is one of Schleese's most prominent advocates. "My horse Bonaparte and I love the saddles because of the way they fit," she says. "They ensure complete back freedom and superior comfort for the rider. The connection and communication between me and my horse has improved a lot! For me, riding in the 'HK' saddle is a big step towards success combined with the welfare of the horse."

In Schleese Saddlery's book, every rider deserves the same chance to be comfortable and effective in their own pursuit of equestrian excellence. For that reason, the company will keep pushing the envelope to find new ways to make their saddles the ideal aids in the horse and rider relationship.

For more information about Schleese Saddlery Service and saddle fit in general, visit www.schleese.com. You can also visit Schleese on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.