

# Saddles Soar - with Schleese!

This year renowned North American saddle manufacturer Schleese Saddlery Service Ltd. is celebrating its 30th year in business. Here is the story of how Certified Master Saddler Jochen Schleese first started his company, and several of the highlights of these past 30 years as a key player in the equestrian industry.



In 1984 after qualifying for the European Championships, Schleese had to retire his Hanoverian gelding for lameness, and his riding career as a three-day eventer came abruptly to an end. He often says, "I wish I knew then what I know now" At very least Pirat would have been sound a lot longer, at best his riding career would have gone much farther.

At the time he was riding with the likes of Bettina Overesch-Hoy and other very talented German young riders. After placing in German nationals in 1982 Pirat began showing signs of lameness – which at the time was not attributed to the saddle, since experts abounded – vets, trainers, farriers who all had a job of keeping the team fit. Remedial applications were used in an attempt to ward off the lameness, including blocking, blistering, re-shoeing and all sorts of pharmaceuticals. It was simply the fact that the construction of the saddle was not in keeping with the requirements of the horse – 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. The advice of the experts was followed, but the result was a 'textbook case' of torture for the horse.

Since he knows now that his horse suffered from an ill-fitting saddle, Schleese became very determined to alleviate this consequence for other horses. It is his life goal and passion to make a difference by educating riders to help them find optimal saddle solutions for comfort, performance and equine development. The saddle must work with the biomechanics of the horse in motion for complete back freedom. For Jochen, the biggest thank you is when a horse begins to move freely, happily, and well in a properly fitted saddle! Often clients throw their arms around him and his highly trained team of saddle ergonomists and saddle fit technicians, crying with joy, because the difference is that visible and they realize how much harm they had unknowingly done riding in an ill-fitting saddle.

Schleese continually works with other equine professionals in many disciplines to increase his knowledge and understanding of making horses more comfortable and protecting their backs. In 2005 the Saddlefit 4 Life® global network was founded with top trainers, physiotherapists, veterinarians, chiropractors, massage therapists, farriers and saddle fitters. Through sharing of expertise and knowledge on products, systems, training methods, they all work together to protect the horse's (and rider's) back from long term damage. The philosophy of S4L is taught in lectures, seminars, demonstrations, symposiums and in one-on-one client sessions all over the world. Saddlefit 4 Life® is taught at the German National Riding School and the Berufsreiterverband (Association of Professional Trainers) as part of the certification program, so that trainers can recognize and diagnose suspected saddle fit issues, and then work with qualified fitters or saddle ergonomists to fix them. S4L has accreditation through the USDF, the CHA, and various other equine associations with whom they partner on education.



## But how did this all start in North America?

Schleese was invited to come to Canada in 1986 as the Official Saddler for the World Dressage Championships, held for the first time outside of Europe. Their first shop was just 100 sq.ft off the side of one of the tractor barns onsite at the competition facility, and placed within the quarantine zone. He and his wife Sabine really couldn't even meet any of the riding public attending the event, but did have a chance to meet such icons as Dr. Josef Neckermann (the first world dressage champion ever and the father of Eva Marie Pracht), Dr. Reiner Klimke, and Canada's own Bonnie Bonello – Schleese's actual first client! The first dollar earned is framed and hanging in their reception area.

Over the course of the next 5 years the company underwent several more expansions (up to 1200 sq. ft.), the first apprentice was hired, another certified saddler came over from Germany, and the first custom saddle was made. Schleese got a contract to build around 100 saddles for Spinneybeck Leather, a company which supplied leather to the interior design industry. They brought out a new line of leather called 'saddle' and to promote it, a saddle in every colour and type of leather it came in was built. Ralph Lauren apparently bought the very first one we made in red leather and put it in his flagship Polo store in NYC. Schleese established saddlery as a registered trade in Ontario and became an authorized training facility. In 1991 the company moved to a larger facility (5000 sq.ft) where the staff increased to 12 and a real computer was purchased. It was also where the equestrian boutique "Caparison" was started which became one of the leading retail outlets for eclectic horsey stuff. (It closed in 1998).

In 1996 the Schleeses hired their bank manager to take over as General Manager, and this man (Earl Rothery) is now Schleese's CEO and business partner.

In 1999 they bought a property just north of Toronto, Ontario. The company grew to 45 employees at one time (it fluctuates now around the high 30s) and 8000 sq. ft. Over the years close to 80 different saddle models were developed – some of them more successful than others, but each one with an innovative design feature and upgrades to reflect the changes in the needs of the riding public.



*Continued...*

*Photos: Top left: Jochen at work with a client's horse. Top right: Jochen riding Pirat at the German Nationals 1982. Center: Germany August 2008 – Jochen Schleese with Olympic dressage team gold medallist and individual bronze medallist Heike Kemmer (co-designer of Schleese's popular "HK Dressage saddle")\*



Schleese has been featured on various TV shows – CBC's "On the Road Again", Report on Business, Discovery Channel "How it's Made" and Harrowsmith Country Life. Both Jochen and Sabine were interviewed by local TV personalities and were lucky enough to be the recipient of numerous business and industry awards, with nominations for many more. The most prestigious of these was probably being a finalist in the Canada Export Award, winning an Ontario Global Trader's Award, and an Award of Merit from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce. Tack'n'Togs magazine named them Manufacturer of the Year in 2008 and Sabine has been on the Profit Top 100 list of Women Business Owners in Canada almost every year since 2000. This year Schleese is a finalist as Manufacturer of the Year in York Region.



Almost all Schleese employees ride, and every one of them is truly passionate about what they do - from the craftsmen in the production shop who build the saddles to the front line who travel all over North America to service clients at over 550 clinic locations to the in-house administrative staff who deal with logistics, organization, and customer service.

Just for fun, here are some interesting numbers from over the past 30 years. For example:

- Over 150,000 horses analysed and evaluated for saddle fit
- Over 20,000 saddles built
- Over ¼ million miles every year flown (Jochen was just inducted into the million mile club with Air Canada)

Truly a North American success story – one that is leaving its mark and a legacy in the equestrian industry!

*Photos: Top: The Schleese Production Facility (present). Center, left: Jochen with John Lyons. Center, right: Spinneybeck saddles: Sabine and Jochen holding two of the coloured saddles made for Spinneybeck.*