

Sabine Schleese: On a *Mission* To Help Horses

By Lauren R. Giannini



Top Photo: Sabine Schleese Photo by Danielle Koren

Inset: Jochen Schleese lecturing in California at the Pacific Sporthorse Selection Auction, 2014.
Photo courtesy of Jochen Schleese



For nearly 30 years, Jochen and Sabine Schleese, founders of Schleese Saddlery Service Ltd. in Canada, have worked with enthusiastic dedication to help as many horses and riders worldwide as possible. Unique for relying on a global network of saddle fit technicians to sell and service their saddles, they are proponents of education in order to best serve the needs of equestrians.

“Helping horses and riders is Jochen’s passion and why he loves to teach others what he knows,” said Sabine. “He isn’t just talented with design, research and development. He’s also our best salesman and teacher, which is why we formed Saddlfit 4 Life, so he can lecture all over the world and certify equine and saddle ergonomists.”

Jochen’s roots in three-day eventing equip him with experiential knowledge, which has contributed greatly to his designs and the bio-

mechanics of saddle fitting. While competing, he trained with Passier in his native Germany and was certified in 1985 as the youngest master saddler in Europe. He’s committed to horses and riders being pain free in and under the saddle. Through his innovative design concept to accommodate the difference in anatomy between men and women, Jochen has become known as the female saddle specialist. Sabine had a lot to do with his unique reputation, albeit in a roundabout way.

Gender Differences

Women had been confiding in Jochen about physiological problems with their saddles, including bladder infections, backache, slipped discs and being rubbed raw. Dressage requires full seat contact, and even forward seat disciplines and sports can result in saddle

sores. The challenge is designing, making and fitting the saddle so that horse and rider are comfortable and enjoy freedom of movement while ensuring protection for the horse’s back. It’s easier said than done.

“When a very highly placed judge asked Jochen to make her saddle, he came up with the plaster cast method to take an actual mold of the rider’s ‘nether regions’ and then make the tree in accordance with each rider’s exact specifications,” said Sabine. “A woman needs to sit on her seat bones and her pubic symphysis to balance, like a tripod. To avoid the pain of rubbing, she will collapse into a chair seat. A

man can achieve proper balance by sitting only on his seat bones.

“The interesting thing was that, prior to this evolution in design, Jochen often asked me to sit on the saddles he made for clients,” continued Sabine. “Almost without exception I found them uncomfortable but — like so many female riders — I thought that was how they were supposed to feel. It was only after he made my plaster cast that the ‘aha!’ revelation occurred!”

Love Affair With Horses

“I was 26 the first time I actually sat on a horse other than for a guided trail ride on vacation somewhere,” said Sabine. “I had just met the love of my life: Jochen Schleese was on the German Young Rider’s Three-Day Event team and, when he wasn’t working, he was usually riding. So, if I wanted to spend any time with him, I had to learn to ride pretty quickly. I have the good fortune to be a natural

athlete and having skied competitively growing up probably didn’t hurt. I was fearless, which in retrospect pretty much translates to stupid.”

Stories about her riding lessons are best recounted by Sabine in person. She’s funny, very upbeat with a great sense of humor. The point of her initial equestrian adventures is that she did it for romance and fell in love with horses also. Jochen had her jumping within three months and perhaps, a bit precipitously, entered her in a pairs relay jumping competition with his brother. Practicing — and falling off — the night before the event left Sabine with bruised ribs and confidence. Jochen switched her to a safer, more reliable horse, but it all came to pieces at the third fence in a triple combination. She figured she’d better do the whole combination again.

“That’s when it all went to heck and the horse decided he would rather head home,” said Sabine. “We jumped a couple other fences on the way out of the arena, and that pretty much was the end of my competitive career.



Sabine and her husband Jochen on their wedding day May 17, 1985, near Hannover Germany.

Photo courtesy of Sabine Schleese

But I didn’t fall off — my mother-in-law had said, ‘Don’t embarrass the family, don’t fall off!’ It was the beginning of my love affair with the horses although I kept my efforts to recreational hacking from then on. There’s nothing more relaxing after a day in the office than taking a crisp gallop through the woods.”

Having time in the saddle gives Sabine a better understanding of all riders, whose bodies change over time, just like their horses’. Saddle design traditionally was a man’s craft and women rode in sidesaddles. By the mid-20th century, the cavalry had disbanded and women embraced riding astride. The fair sex also became the majority as consumers of equestrian-related products. Schleese’s innovative approach to saddle design and fit resulted in the AdapTree®, which allows both angle and width to be adjusted as the horse changes. Most riders, who buy a Schleese, testify that over time, they save money far beyond the initial cost of the saddle.

“Family” Business

Sabine and Jochen own and operate Schleese with Earl and Cathy Rothery. They each bring strengths to the business, with Jochen being the “front man” and the most familiar to the horse world. Earl, their former bank account manager, is their CEO and has been their financial and administrative person for almost 20 years. Cathy works for Saddleft 4 Life and with Sabine in marketing.

Sabine has proven herself in the business world. According to a 2014 article in “Canadian Business,” Schleese has moved at a steady pace to be a frontrunner in international industry without any help from retailers or distributors. They focus on direct sales to the end user with 70 percent of the Schleese Saddlery revenue coming from outside Canada, especially from the U.S. and Europe. As the article states, Sabine

placed 98th on the 2014 PROFIT/Chatelaine Women’s Top 100, her 11th appearance on this list.

“My strengths are in writing, networking, marketing and PR,” said Sabine. “We’re close friends, vacation together, and occasionally fight about stuff, but we have a very strong partnership and will soon be family: their son Jordan is marrying our daughter Samantha. Unfortunately neither one has anything to do with the business.”

Now & Tomorrow

“Saddleft 4 Life has been growing organically, and a very strong five-year plan for the Schleese Saddlery is in place,” said Sabine. “It’s also interesting to see how many companies are copying what we say, how we advertise, how we sell, which is all good, because at the end of the day it’s the horses that will benefit. I truly think that we have made a revolutionary change in the industry and other companies are now waking up.”



Sabine winning Exporter of the Year from the Organization of Women in International Trade.
Photo by Cathy Rothery

The Schleese “family” network of certified saddle fit technicians and the emphasis on education for riders, veterinarians, trainers and other equine professionals have worked very well. There’s something about a genuinely adjustable saddle that can be changed to accommodate the horse’s needs throughout training and maturing. The alternative is shelling out big bucks for vet care to treat nagging unsoundness, changing saddles to no avail (more money out the window) and not being able to enjoy a happy horse.

“Maintenance is an ongoing requirement, but

that’s part of the educational aspect of Schleese,” said Sabine. “I always laugh when riders tell us how long they’ve had their saddle and never had an adjustment, but it’s not funny for the poor horse! Has that saddle so restricted the horse at his various reflex points that he simply cannot change in his musculature? Education is the key to progress.

“Thankfully, we have accomplished a lot — our industry and business accolades attest to that, but it’s all about helping the horses and their riders,” continued Sabine. “Opinions about saddle fitting now have much more support

from scientific facts. Fiber optic cameras, thermography, laser measurements, etc., all provide unarguable proof of the importance of fit. Every rider should work with an educated and certified saddle fitter or ergonomist. Our focus is on the amateur and recreational rider who truly loves her horse and wants what’s best for it. We aren’t just running a business. We’re on a mission, because we love horses.”

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