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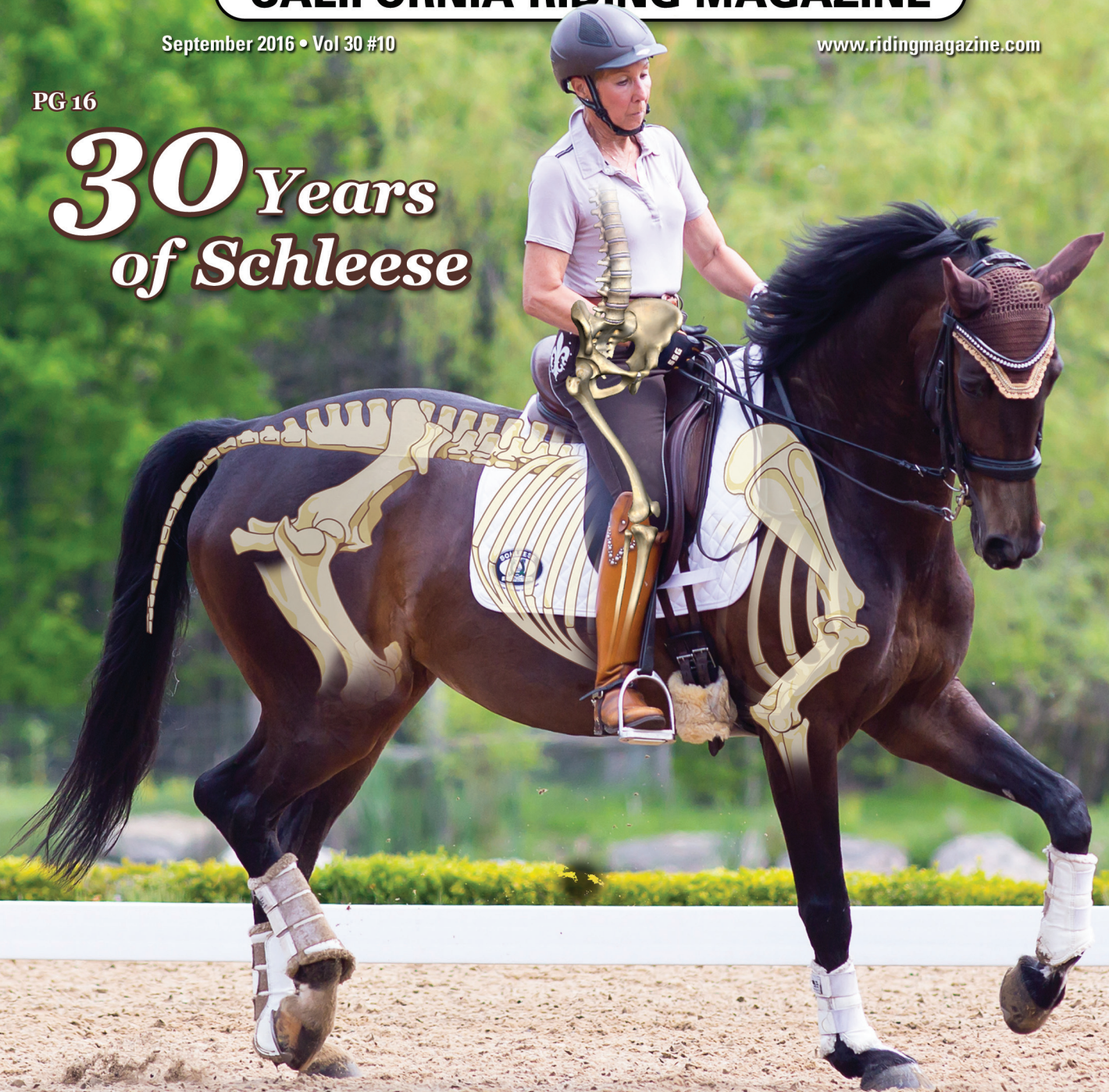
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Thirty Years of Schleese

by Sabine Schleese
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History of saddle maker and fitter illustrates company's leadership in an evolving field.

We have been blessed. Truly blessed – the statistics state that most businesses barely last the first five years of their existence, and here we are, celebrating 30 years of achievement and success. Although initially it was just Jochen and myself, over the past four decades we have grown globally to employ over 100 people worldwide – supporting 100 families. We have our wonderful and loyal clients to thank; we have our skilled and dedicated staff to thank. But we also have publications such as *California Riding Magazine* to thank for working with us and being willing to showcase what it is that we do – for the eighth year now.

A lot has changed since we first opened shop in our little 100 square-foot workshop in the quarantine zone of the World Dressage Championships locale – held for the first time outside of Europe in 1986. The Pracht family (including Olympians Eva Maria Pracht – daughter of Josef Neckermann, the first ever World Dressage Champion in 1966 – and her daughter Martina) were instrumental in allowing us to establish ourselves in Canada. Although Jochen had been recently certified as the youngest ever master saddler in Europe at the time (1985), and was a successful internationally qualified event rider, coming over to North America was probably the luckiest decision we could have made.

When we first arrived, it became clear that there was really no one around with the same level of training, experience and philosophy that would become the basis of Schleese Saddlery Service (and later, Saddlefit 4 Life®). Saddles were sold for the most part as commodity items – they either fit or they didn't – and if they didn't, well there were always pads. Lots of pads. It amazed us no end to see sometimes to what heights people had to resort to in order to gain some semblance of rideability in their saddles. Jumper riders were especially obvious in this – keyhole pads, felt pads, rubber pads... where was the close contact in all of this when it was said and done? Apparently "saddle fitter" was not even a considered career path... very, very rarely did anyone from the retail store even think to go out to the barn to actually see if the saddle worked for the horse.

So – this was an open niche! Schleese has been a market leader in revolutionizing the way saddles have been brought to the consumer in that we were among the first to establish the necessity for on-site saddle fit evaluations and adjustments. Many of our innovative products and ideas have served as templates for the rest of the equine industry, which is why we now concentrate on expanding our reach and influence in the industry by working together with other equine professionals to be able to reach even more riders. We have established ourselves as the "Female Saddle Specialist" to address the specific needs of the majority of our market demographics. But in order to recognize how far we've come, it's important to know where we came from.

A Short History

Our forefathers depended on the soundness of the horse in order to be able to continue to do their jobs, or even survive. Horses at the turn of the century (and up to the mid-1900s) were still used primarily as working animals in agriculture or in the military. Their owners and riders were true horsemen, and generally knew everything they needed to know to keep their horses sound and their saddles and tack fitting well.

When the industrial revolution really took off and horses were relegated to the sidelines, it seems that a lot of this knowledge and experience was simply lost in translation. It was not until the mid-1950s that equestrianism as a recreational and competitive sport began to really take hold – with a huge shift in demographics to the female side of the population. Unfortunately, although there are certainly still many true 'equestriennes' out there, many of today's riders are women who are just now taking up the sport (having time and discretionary funds to spare for this not-inexpensive pastime) really have never had the advantage of being raised with horses, and need to rely on industry professionals to keep their horses happy.

One of the most glaring changes has been in the design of the saddle. Many of you will be familiar (at least in theory) with the McClellan saddle from Civil War days. This saddle epitomizes how much time and effort went into the design of military saddles, with a goal to produce a properly fitting saddle that would keep horses healthy for the longest time.

McClellan studied and documented the design, construction and innovative features of saddles from various European countries, and watched how the cavalries in several military conflicts used these. Based on his observations and analyses in Europe, he then developed a specific design for the U.S. Army, which at the time was almost certainly the ultimate in saddle-tree innovation. It was used for the time during the Civil War in



Head office of Schleese Saddlery Service
in Holland Landing, Ontario, Canada.



Jochen performing a HorseShape®
Laser scan on a dressage horse.
Photo: Danielle Koren



1859, and was built for the last time in 1928. It was still in use during the Second World War, and is the basis for the design and development of the saddles used by many endurance riders today.

What makes it so good?

The saddle allows for shoulder relief to accommodate the movement of the horse's shoulders when in motion. The v-billet system is adjustable to ensure that the saddle will not "bridge;" it has a wide gullet, and it has a cut-out in the middle of the tree (which we have incorporated into our saddle designs as the patented Crotch Comfort® system). These are all great features with necessary benefits to the horse, and it is definitely not necessary to reinvent the wheel to design a saddle that is ergonomically friendly to horse and rider.

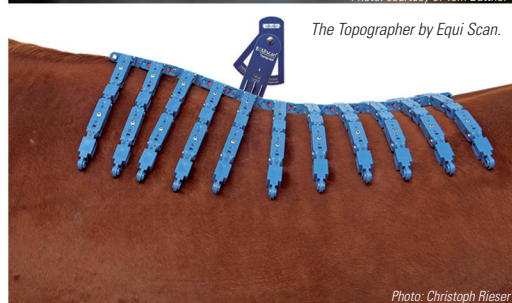
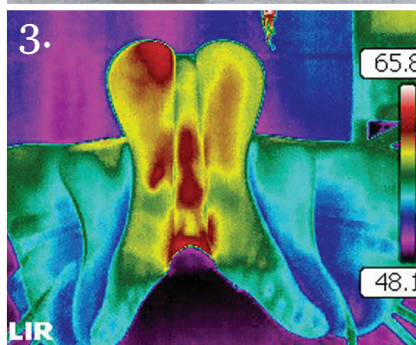
Many of the latest "innovations" in saddle design have actually found their origins in history, but much of this "common knowledge" has been lost over the years. Saddlery is not a new science; saddles have been around and in use for many centuries. Especially in the cavalry, it was crucial for the soldier to have a rideable, healthy horse available for use over long distances. It used to be one of the jobs of the cavalry officer to teach his men how to make the necessary adjustments to their saddle to bring it back into balance after changes in their horse's musculature or nutrition altered his conformation.

In those days, many saddlers actually lived with their horses. Working with them on a daily basis allowed them to become so intimate that they intuitively came to know what was best for their horses. This knowledge was passed on through the generations, mostly from father to son. Most saddles were made on an individual, totally custom basis, beginning with the horse. The tree was made after the horse's conformation was analyzed and measured; leather was cut accordingly, and the saddle was flocked as necessary to accommodate a specific horse's back. This is still how saddles are made for working horses in Brazil by their owners – the cowboys.

In the 20th Century, the recognition of the horse for recreational and athletic purposes opened the equestrian industry as a mainstream activity – which led to the rebirth of saddlery on a whole new level. Women began to ride astride on saddles which had been made for men, preferring their security over the traditional female side saddle. Saddle manufacturers jumped on the bandwagon and began mass production of generically fitting saddles (narrow, medium, wide, 16"-19"). Demand created the process and the business was driven by business people rather than knowledgeable saddlers and horse people. (It is interesting to note that, although the development of tanks, jeeps and artillery replaced the use of horses for the most part after the WWII, the sport of three-day eventing actually had its origins in the military. The first competitors were almost exclusively cavalry officers and to this day this sport is nicknamed "military" in Germany.)

So as it turns out, a saddle that was originally conceptualized for military use is nowadays responsible to ensure fun and adventure rather than used in place of fear and conflict. Times may have changed, but the health and comfort of horse and rider still need to be the focus of saddle fit. More manufacturers ought to look to the origins of especially the McClellan in their design; sometimes

Schleese Saddlery, continued on pg 18



1. Sabine and Jochen Schleese in front of their original shop location holding two of the coloured saddles commissioned by Spinneybeck Leather Company in 1987.
2. The McClellan saddle is, to this day, the template for many saddles developed for endurance riders.
3. Thermographic scan of a dressage saddle showing "hot" red zones of excessive pressure.
4. Rein Tension Device.
5. This is the LWT (leather withers tracer) by Schleese, which determines the withers and shoulder muscle shapes.
6. This ergonomist is measuring the horse's shoulder angle using the Sprenger Withers Gauge.
7. The BVFR device (translated to mean the Association of Saddlers and harness makers in Germany).

Photo: courtesy of kivakva.com

too much focus is put on “looks” rather than functionality and purpose.

What is still interesting to note is how little actual required regulation there is in this industry. Riding is an inherently dangerous activity, yet pretty much anyone can still hang out their shingle and purport to be a trainer. Although things are slowly changing, there is still little true requirement for certification in any of the jobs surrounding the horse.

In 1990 Schleese registered the trade of saddlery and became the only authorized training facility in Ontario. Together with the Ministry of Skills Development, we developed a 6000 hour certification process (three years), and have graduated many new saddlers – some of whom have lately been awarded the title of “Master.” But again – master in North America (especially in this trade) is a somewhat arbitrary term, based on experience rather than true examination and certification, as it is in Europe. We are truly gratified to see the adoption of Jochen’s book *Suffering in Silence: The Saddle Fit Link to Physical and Psychological Trauma in Horses* in various “saddle fitting schools” and training facilities – another step in reaching a common language with the end result being the health and well-being of the horse.

Technological Innovations

Technology – especially in the field of diagnostics and analysis of saddle fit – has also made huge inroads in the industry. Most saddle fitters will come out to take a look at your horse and measure his withers size and shape using a flexible wire curve. This is pretty much the minimum measurement you should expect during a saddle fitting session. This does not however, tell you much more about the horse’s three-dimensional back shape (size and length of the saddle support area) and really only works to determine whether you need a narrow, medium or wide tree in most saddle brands.

Many tools have been developed over the years to assist in the diagnosis of saddle fit, however, as “sexy” as they are, they are just that – tools – providing information that exemplifies the situation at a given moment. Unless you have someone that actually knows what to do with this information to provide you a solution to your issue, it’s pretty much without value. Many people can tell you what’s visually wrong with your saddle but there are very few who can analyze the data to actually tell you why you are having the issue you are.

Several of these tools can be subjectively manipulated so that, in the wrong hands, they become simply a marketing tool to show you exactly what the technician wants you to see. Thermography is one of these tools which can provide a very pretty picture filled with lots of colours, but the interpretation is open to error unless you have someone well-trained in the use of the instrument. Computerized saddle pads to measure pressure points – integrating sensors in every square inch of the pad which are linked to a computer readout – are also not without fault, as pressure will change according to the gait and

rider balance.

One of the newest tools on the market is the HorseShape® laser, which is truly an interesting piece of machinery, reading the three dimensional shape of the horse’s back within seconds and transmitting this information back to the main computer for analysis. It is used best when a full custom saddle is being made to accommodate a particular horse’s back, but also allows the horse owner the option of getting a “cut-out” form of the shape which clearly allows comparisons of changing conformation over time.

The Arc Device™ is a manual measuring device, fitted to each individual horse’s back while the saddle fitter or saddle ergonomist records the angles. This is also used to ensure that a saddle is refitted properly to accommodate the horse’s back shape.

There are a couple of other devices available commercially (only in Europe at this point) to ascertain the shape of the horse’s back, but they are somewhat convoluted and unwieldy with several kinks to be worked out before they are acceptable for general use. The Topographer® by EquiScan consists of 11 individually moving sectioned arms which are laid across the horse’s back. Each individual number on each segment is recorded. Until this can be done automatically/ electronically it becomes prohibitive (time-wise) to do this – although the results are very accurate.

There is a device approved by the Association of Saddlers and Harness Makers in Germany, called the BVFR, which determines the horse’s topline. But because this device always needs to be used in conjunction with another device to also determine the actual shape of the saddle support area, it too becomes a bit complicated to use accurately.

We prefer the simple Sprenger Withers Gauge to determine withers shape and angle to ensure enough room at the pommel of the saddle, and a combination of the Arc Device, an LWT (leather withers tracer) and the HorseShape Laser (if the client asks) to determine the actual accurate three dimensional shape of the horse’s back and the saddle support area. We are also integrating the MediLogic® computerized saddle pad into our diagnostics and offering ‘the ultimate diagnostic experience’ as an option for a complete and detailed analysis. The MediLogic pad enables us to see the pressure distribution on the horse’s back while in motion. It allows us to see where undesirable pressure peaks occur and how riding technique influences pressure distribution. We also use the Pegasus Gait analysis software, the Rein Tension Device, and the Port Lewis impression pad. It can sometimes seem like overkill, but there are clients who want the full deal and peace of mind that knowing what is going on brings with it!

It’s still a matter of working with someone who knows what they’re doing to ensure proper saddle fit for you and your horse – regardless of the devices that are available to make this “easier.” There are no shortcuts to expertise – just tools to make it all come alive!

And how did this all come together for us? Every business has a reason for starting... I think these comments from Jochen exemplify the passion behind Schleese Saddlery the best:

“It was as a young boy growing up in Argentina

that I found my love for horses. I watched the gauchos galloping alongside my father’s car, chasing a reha at full tilt while swinging the bolo with both hands. The magic was the feeling that horse and rider were one. From that moment on, all I wanted to do was capture this same magic. When we moved back to Germany, my wish was finally granted and I got my first horse. While following my childhood dream and seeking this magic, I fell into the trap of money, medals and fame. Nothing came close to what I was looking for – it was all about man and the horse/machine. I lost touch with everything I was drawn to horses for in the first place. When I found my calling in my career, it was the opportunity for me to reconnect and finally recapture this magic I first felt in Argentina. I’m now able to share this worldwide with people who are searching for the same miracle where man and horse move and feel and think as one.”

Never again should any horse have to suffer for the ignorance of his rider - it’s all about helping the horse by improving back health and comfort through education. This is my calling – teaching professionals around the world so together we can improve the well-being of horses and riders worldwide.”



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