



HOLISTIC HORSE®

Integrative Care for Horse and Rider

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Saddle Fit and Industry Education

Education has become a buzzword, but it is nonetheless a significant concept – especially in our industry, which is still largely unregulated and so inherently dangerous that this situation boggles the mind.



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A recent article in the Journal of Veterinary Science concerning the repeatability of 20 Society of Master Saddlers (SMS) Qualified Saddle Fitters observations of static saddle fit outlines the lack of cohesiveness in the methodology of assessing saddle fit. The SMS has committed to overhauling their entire saddle fitting curriculum within the next year or two – recognizing the fact that a) saddle making does not equal saddle fitting and b) their saddle fitting training is somewhat remedial in its ramifications. Further work is definitely necessary to standardize the criteria of what is saddle fit and how should saddles be fitted – and perhaps to develop a common language that is accepted throughout the industry.

Education has become a buzzword, but it is nonetheless a significant concept – especially in our industry, which is still largely unregulated and so inherently dangerous that this situation boggles the mind. Through public awareness in the last years, the demand has been raised by the consumer (i.e. riders) that their trainers have a certain accreditation; they know their farriers have been trained and certified, and they expect a certain base level of knowledge from their saddle fitters. However, people can still pretty much call themselves whatever they want; add the word ‘master’ whatever to their titles, and for the most part, people are still reluctant to question the credentials. It seems like there is still a certain fear in requiring standardized professional development and testing – especially from the people who have been working in a certain part of the industry for years and don’t want to be discredited or exposed.



Carien Schippers-Photo

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Schleese Saddles

We tried for years to establish a recognized and registered program in the trade of saddlery itself and were successful at least in the province of Ontario, where it was added to the roster of official apprenticeships in 1990. However, even though we suggested a certain leniency of ‘grandfathering’ longtime practitioners into the trade, the resistance lobby was too strong. It seems that (especially in this industry) tradespeople are very protective of what they know, being questioned on their expertise, and sharing their wisdom with other equine professionals. I have actually been told that “oh no – we can’t ask so-and-so about their credentials. That would be rude!” Really? How else are you going to be able to ascertain the authority of the people who you entrust the care of your horse too if you are not even allowed to ask the basic questions?

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Through Saddlfit 4 Life® we have now established training and certification programs in two brand new career paths – that of Equine Ergonomist and Saddle Ergonomist. The former involves a 7-day training course (which is offered several times a year in Europe, North America, and South Africa) which allows the successful candidate to work with a saddle fitter in analyzing, diagnosing and measuring saddle fit. The Equine Ergonomist is not trained to actually make the adjustments, which is where the Saddle Ergonomist training then comes in. We feel the level of education for the Saddle Ergonomist goes above the Saddle Fitter training, as we focus more on equine and human anatomy and biomechanics and how these relate to saddle fit issues in both static and dynamic phases. In recent years there seems to have been a proliferation of agencies and societies offering saddle fit courses and certifications, but none are as intense or require constant recertification such as the S4L courses do.

There are also a gratifying number of Equine Studies Diploma and Degree courses being offered all around USA and Canada for interested students wanting to work in the equestrian industry, but the potential lucrative job market for graduates is still disturbingly small. Our own Saddlfit 4 Life® curriculum has been somewhat integrated into the Bachelor of Bio-Resources Management program at the University of Guelph, and will soon be offered as an ongoing elective, but the path ahead is still very challenging. It is only with constant communication and continuing efforts in education that change will come. We truly hope that Saddlfit 4 Life® will be a key resource in the attempt to find a common ground which at the end of the day, is for the good of the horse that we all love!

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