



# Schleese Saddlery

A Partner in the Saddlefit 4 Life® Global Network of Equine Professionals

Horse's welfare is at the heart of an ever-evolving company.



by Kim F. Miller

While most North American businesses hunkered down for tough times as the economy sank into crisis mode, Schleese Saddlery logged the best month in its 22-year history this past October. Not bad for a company whose president's mission is simply to "help as many horses as possible."

The Ontario, Canada custom saddle maker and saddle fitting empire is built upon the expertise and progressive ideas of Jochen Schleese. Raised and trained in the craft of saddle making in his native Germany, Jochen invented the patented *AdapTree*® adjustable saddle tree in 1996. His latest innovation is Saddlefit 4 Life®, a consortium of equine experts pooling their knowledge to make sure saddle design incorporates all that is known about horse and human anatomy and equine behavior.

The company's managing director and Jochen's wife, Sabine Schleese, credits the company's success in bad times to its reputation and to their customers' priorities. "People don't buy *what* you make, they buy *why* you make it," she asserts. There are many alternatives to Schleese's main product, the saddle, but not many are built on a truly adjustable tree and none come with the long-term service offered by Schleese. "We have a passion for what we do and I think the level of care we put into our saddles and our saddle-fitting service imparts that."

It's a quality of passion that Schleese's main customers, women, appreciate. Schleese specializes in saddles designed for the female's pelvic alignment, but their customers, of course, are not just concerned with their own comfort. "Most of our customers are baby boomers with discretionary income," Sabine says. "Their horse is their baby and they are very well educated about what is best for their horse."

These riders also tend to amortize the cost of a well-made saddle. The patented *AdapTree*® upon which all Schleese models are built enables adjustments to accommodate the original horse's changing physique and/or a new horse. The flexible polyurethane tree comes in quarter sizes from 16" to 19" and narrow, medium or wide dimensions at three key points in the seat.

Californians, along with Germans, comprise a majority of Schleese's customers, both for new custom saddles and for individual saddle fittings and saddle fit workshops. Increasing awareness of the importance of saddle fit is reflected in the frequency of Jochen's visits West. He now comes West between eight to 10 times a year, reports Margot Lovett, Schleese's client services manager for Central and Southern California.

## LOCAL APPEARANCES

Known for his engaging presentations and charismatic nature, Jochen has clinics scheduled in San Diego, Orange and Ventura counties the week of Dec. 9-14. (Contact Margot at 949-348-1863 or [Margot\\_Lovett@yahoo.com](mailto:Margot_Lovett@yahoo.com) for the latest dates and locations.) An amateur dressage rider in San Juan Capistrano, Margot first sat in a Schleese saddle when she was trying out a new horse 10 years ago. "It was the most comfortable saddle I'd ever sat in," she recalls. It didn't hurt that "it was the most gorgeous saddle to look at!"

She bought the horse, and a new saddle to go with it. The fitting session with Jochen sealed her loyalty to Schleese. Margot's previous horse was a small Arabian in the midst of a lameness that remained a mystery despite six months and a few thousand dollars worth of attempts to diagnose the problem. He was sound in turn-out and lame under saddle. During the fitting session with her new horse, Margot asked Jochen to take a look at the Arabian. He quickly determined that the saddle Margot had been using was too long. "Jochen said, 'I bet the saddle digs into his kidneys when he rounds his back and he goes three-legged lame,'" Margot recounts. "No one had said one word about saddle fit up until then." That was Margot's "Ah Ha!" moment. In the intervening decade her understanding of the significance of saddle fit has been in synch with trends throughout the industry worldwide.

## NOT JUST DRESSAGE

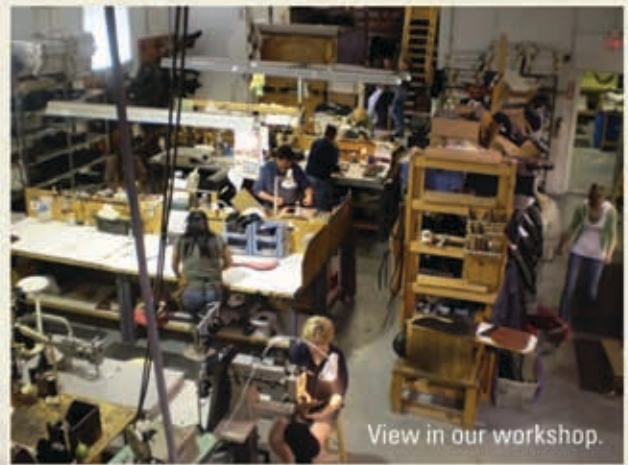
Schleese is best known among dressage riders. Germany's Olympic dressage team gold and individual Olympic dressage bronze medalist Heike Kemmer is one of many international stars to endorse the Saddlefit 4 Life philosophy. After her winning rides in Beijing, Kemmer stated, "It improves the communication between horse and rider, so that it translates the aids better and we can move forward together in a good ride." The company makes saddles for every discipline and their popularity is keeping pace with the ever-broadening understanding of the role saddle fit plays in the comfort and performance for both horse and rider.

Schleese introduced a trail riding saddle two years ago and that group of mostly recreational riders has been quick to jump on the bandwagon. A popular speaker in demand at equine gatherings around the globe, Jochen was a featured guest at the Trail Blazers convention in Santa Barbara last month. To Jochen, that gig was just as important as his upcoming teaching job at Germany's National Riding School and his role in the recently released documentary by Dr. Gerd Heuschmann, author of *Tug Of War: Classical Versus 'Modern' Dressage*. Dr. Heuschmann's book is subtitled *How Incorrect Riding Negatively Affects the Horse's Health*. The documentary, *Voice of the Horse*, will focus on the same topic, with poor saddle fit included as a form of incorrect riding.

Whoever the audience, Jochen is keen to share his experience with horse owners. "It's his *raison d'être*," explains Sabine, who laughingly admits that Schleese Saddlery's accountants sometimes question whether the couple, and their partner Earl Rothery, are in business to make money or for the altruistic cause of helping horses. Schleese's presentations have been at the two USDF FEI Trainers Conferences in the last year and at the upcoming Equine Affaire (Jan. 29-Feb. 1 in Pomona) are just a few other indicators of the ever-broadening interest in saddle fit in general and in Jochen's perspective on the subject.

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Jochen fitting a horse.



View in our workshop.



Jochen draws Saddle Support Area at a lecture/demo and Saddle Fit Session for riders.

## A HORSEMAN AT HEART

An eventing rider throughout his youth, Jochen was a member of Germany's Young Riders team. He kept up with his own riding through his apprenticeship with Passier & Son in Germany, where, at 22, he became the youngest Master Saddler to be certified throughout Europe. That was in 1984 and, since then, he has had little time to pursue the sport himself. During compulsory military service in Germany, Jochen was a "saddler" in the Air Force, meaning he made cockpit seats, and his training also included an internship with the carmaker Karmann Ghia.

Canadian Sabine Schleese was not a horse person when she met Jochen on a ski trip in Italy in 1981. But she learned to ride in order to spend time with him. In 1985, Jochen and Sabine quit their jobs in Germany and traveled the world for three months. They then settled in Sabine's native Ontario and set about assessing how Jochen's talents might fit in the North American equestrian market. "We saw that saddles here were treated like commodities," she recalls. "Saddles were used and abused and people moved on to the next thing. Nobody was offering the kind of service that we were familiar with from Germany and that's where we saw a niche available. There was no one around who could repair trees or fit properly."

An invitation to be the Official Saddler for the World Dressage Championships in 1986 in Toronto emboldened the Schleeses' hunch and they established the company that same year. In the 22 years since, Schleese has become synonymous with saddle fit and has racked up many honors in and beyond the horse industry. This past year Jochen was named Best of the Best English Manufacturer by Tack 'n' Togs

Magazine and Sabine was named Exporter of the Year by the Organization of Woman in International Trade. The

Ontario Ministry of Skills Development asked the Schleeses to develop an apprenticeship program for saddle makers. Meanwhile, the company's in-house training program for saddle fitters is pressing hard to keep up with demand for in-person saddle fitting sessions.

Whether it is Jochen or one of the company's Certified Saddle Fit Technicians, a saddle fitting session starts with the saddle in action. "It's not about what the saddle does while the horse is standing in the cross-ties," notes Margot, who organizes the clinics in Southern California. Horse and rider will work at all three gaits as a "dust pattern" indicating what the saddle does in motion is created and the technician observes. Several horse, rider and saddle measurements are taken, then factored in with input from both the fitter and the client regarding the saddle's impact on the horse and rider. "Thanks to recent research compiled at veterinary universities, saddle fit is not an opinion anymore," notes Sabine. "It is now a combination of science and art, which helps both the rider and saddle fit technician protect the horse from long term damage."

Preventing damage was the inspiration for the Saddlefit 4 Life® program. It is a network of international veterinarians, trainers (including Dr. Gerd Heuschmann, DVM and Hannes Mueller, head trainer at the German National Riding School), physiotherapists and chiropractors dedicated to protecting horse and rider from long term damage through proper saddle fitting and education. The program is taught in Australia, Asia, North America, Holland, Germany and Europe and American riders are constantly benefiting from its findings.

Speaking engagements, international acclaim and business success are gratifying markers of the saddlery's successes. "But the biggest reward is having a client be so thankful for the change our saddles have made in their horse," relays Sabine. As the testimonials page on [www.schleese.com](http://www.schleese.com) attests, the number of grateful expressions is growing right along with this ever-evolving company.



For more information on Schleese Saddlery, visit [www.schleese.com](http://www.schleese.com) or call 800-225-2242.



Jochen and Sabine on their wedding day on horseback in Germany.



Heike Kemmer and her Olympic medals.



Jochen and Dr. Gerd Heuschmann (DMV at the German National Riding School) teaching saddle fitting to trainers.