

## **Riding High With Success**

By Kristin (Bieman) Vilcius for Queen's Alumni Review – Winter 2004

*Schleese Saddlery, a family business headed by Sabine Schleese, NMBA'00, has emerged as one of North America's leading makers of fine saddles.*

You might expect the co-founder and CEO of the largest saddlery in North America to be a passionate rider. If so, you'd be mistaken. In fact, while growing up, Sabine Schleese, NMBA'00, had no particular interest in horses. She learned to ride after meeting her husband-to-be, Jochen Schleese, but now the demands of Schleese Saddlery, raising two teenage daughters, and indulging the entire family's passion for competitive ballroom dancing leave scant time for horses.

Sabine and Jochen, a former event rider with the German national team, founded their company in 1986. The Schleese were living in Germany when Jochen was invited to be the Master Saddler at the World Dressage Championships held near Newmarket, Ontario, that year. Sabine, born in Germany but raised in Canada, had been looking for the right opportunity to return to Canada with the family.

"I went to Germany for what I thought would be a year to teach English after I finished my undergrad degree at the U of Guelph. My intention was to come back and do a law degree or an MBA," she recalls. That one year in Germany turned into nine, and Sabine's MBA plans were shelved for 20 years.

From a two-person operation, Schleese Saddlery has grown to a profitable company employing 32 people. After a number of moves leading to seven years in Stouffville, the company outgrew those facilities, returning to the Newmarket area with the purchase of its present building in Holland Landing, north of Toronto, in 1999. Another indication of the company's success and international reputation is that, since 2000, Sabine's name has been on Profit Magazine's list of Top 100 Woman Business Owners.

Mass production is not the key to producing fine saddles or to success for Schleese Saddlery. The company produces about 900 saddles each year, all either custom-made or custom fit. "Most riders are concerned about fitting the saddle to the horse," explains Sabine, "but it's actually much more complicated, and just as important, to fit the saddle to the rider." There are seven "points of reference" in measuring a saddle for a horse, but more than twenty for a rider. If a rider's weight is not properly balanced, the horse will not be comfortable.

Schleese saddles are renowned for several patented design innovations. "Jochen realized that most riders are now woman, but saddles were still being designed for male riders", she notes. As well as altering seat widths and padding for their female clients, adaptations were made to the saddle's structural foundation, the tree, to relieve friction on the horse's shoulders. "A standard saddle tree can rub the shoulder when the horse is moving. This causes stress and in some cases can lead to injury."

Schleese Saddlery was already well established when Sabine enrolled in the Executive MBA at Queen's in 1998. However, completing an MBA fulfilled the dream he had set aside so many years before. Nevertheless, the class schedule and workload were onerous and Sabine admits the completion of the degree would not have been possible without the support and understanding of her phenomenal staff.

Sabine attended classes by teleconference, and so she spent little time on Queen's campus - just two weeks each summer - but that was enough to develop a fondness for Kingston. However, she is most enthusiastic about the three and a half weeks spent in Europe during the second summer of the program. Intensive courses in International Law and International Business were completed at the International Study Center at Herstmonceux Castle, from where participants traveled to the continent to examine several European businesses.

Sabine has kept in touch with some of her Queen's MBA professors through her association with Innovators Alliance, an association of Ontario fast growth firms. These professors, notably Niraj Bhargava and Elspeth Murray, work with Queen's Center for Enterprise Development, which is also involved with Innovators Alliance.

"The Queen's MBA was a challenging, life-changing experience," Sabine says. Juggling the demands of studies with business and family responsibilities made her realize, "I could accomplish anything I set my mind to." That confidence and determination goes a long way toward explaining Sabine's personal and professional success.