

## Saddle Soar

By *Stephanie E. Ponder*

For The Costco Connection Nov/Dec 2004 Volume 17 Number 6

Jochen Schleese left Hanover, Germany, in 1986 with his wife, Sabine, taking with him the one skill he possessed: making saddles. The youngest certified master saddler in Germany, he was invited to be the official saddler for the World Dressage Championships, held outside Newmarket, Ontario. Newly married, the two originally thought they might take several months to travel the world. Instead, inspired by what they saw as a lack of competition, they came up with the idea of opening a Saddlery, where they'd repair and make saddles, in Ontario.

Jochen remembers earning \$50 for his first week of work. "I don't know what we were thinking," he says. He told Sabine that if they could make \$30,000 in their first year, they'd be successful. The business earned more than twice that amount. Setting their sights on nothing short of being the biggest and best, the two took inspiration from the global technology company 3M and thought "3S"-calling themselves Schleese Saddlery Service.

Jochen says his three biggest hurdles were the language, finding materials and hiring qualified help. Through their search for skilled labour, Sabine worked with the Ministry of Skills Development to have Saddlery recognized as a registered trade, requiring a 6,000-hour, or three-year, schedule of training. That step, says Sabine, gave Schleese Saddlery Service "credibility as the only authorized training facility in the trade of Saddlery in Ontario," which helped them set the industry standards for Saddlery training. Their 35-member staff consists of apprentices and saddlers-one brought over from Germany. They also employ 15 independent agents across North America who sell their saddles.

Not only did Jochen revolutionize the trade, he also changed the way people buy saddles. Educating riders about how the right saddle can benefit both the rider and horse is a passion he turned into their patented *AdapTree*® saddle the only fully adjustable and flexible saddle tree on the market.

Schleese Saddlery Service has been featured on the Discovery Channel and in The Wall Street Journal. The business has also won several community, small-business and industry awards for their success and innovation. Jochen's saddles even appeared in the 2004 Summer Olympics, used by riders from the U.S., Canada, Germany and Holland.

For others looking to start a new life in another country, Jochen offers the following advice: Learn the language. He didn't know any English and was dependent on Sabine while getting the business going. Sabine adds, "Starting a business in a new country is scary; be sure to do your homework and be prepared to network, network, network!"