

Saddlemaker Schleese takes pride in his work

BRUCE STAPLEY
Correspondent

Jochen Schleese is a man with mission, a dedicated professional determined to gain respect for the industry he has given so much of his life to promote.

The 29-year-old Schleese is a master saddler.

And while that doesn't mean much to provincial or federal authorities, let alone the average Canadian citizen, the local resident is out to convince the powers that be to afford saddle making the same official recognition given other trades which require the learning of specific skills.

Schleese, who served a three-year apprenticeship as a saddler in his native Germany, came to Canada for the World Dressage Championships in 1986.

While attending the event, which was held at Cedar Valley's Eglinton Equestrian Club, Schleese was approached by club official Hans Pracht to set up a saddle making shop on the premises.

"There was no one making custom English saddles in North America," Schleese said. "They were being brought in from Europe."

Schleese took Pracht up on his offer. Five years later, he is the owner of a flourishing custom saddlery operation, with five employees in addition to himself and his wife Sabine, who looks after the business end of the endeavor.

He makes saddles for members of the Canadian Equestrian Team and includes 1988 Canadian Olympic bronze medallist dressage team member Ashley Munro on his list of customers.

Schleese was recently commissioned by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to make a halter for the President of Mexico, and he was also called upon to repair the saddle of Canadian show jumping champion Ian Millar at a recent event at the equestrian club.

Schleese has established an apprenticeship program for saddle makers for the province of Ontario.

He currently has two apprentices working in his shop, with one, John Banbury, soon to become the first certified Canadian saddle maker recognized by the Ministry of Skills Development.

But despite his efforts, Schleese has been unable to convince the federal government of the necessity of proper training for saddle makers. His apprenticeship program has been accepted, but it is still not mandatory.

"We have made saddlery a registered trade in Canada," he said.

"Our ultimate goal is to convince the government that the trade should be regulated. Horseback riding is a dangerous sport. If I make a saddle that breaks, and the rider is hurt, I could be sued."

Schleese said there should be guidelines for saddle makers just as there are regulations for auto mechanics.

As a first step in this direction, he is working on having saddlery put on the government's Skills Shortages list so as to be able to apply for government funding for his apprenticeship program.

Schleese, who once rode with the German Three Day Event Team which came close to qualifying for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, said that his is a trade which demands specific knowledge of both horses and their riders.

Part of his own extensive training included a study of human anatomy. He keeps models of the skeletal structure of human pelvises on hand to assist in the making of saddles.

Unlike production saddle makers, he recognizes that there is often a huge difference between male and female pelvises.

With saddles traditionally being



Jochen Schleese and wife Sabine operate a custom English saddle shop.

made for men, this has led to extreme discomfort for many female riders.

"The vast majority of riders in Canada are women, and the top five dressage riders in the world are females," explained Schleese.

"But the female pelvis is often wider than that of a male, so women sometimes feel like they are sitting on a two by four."

Consequently, Schleese sometimes goes so far as to make a plaster mold of his customer's seat to ensure a

proper fitting saddle, especially if the rider has suffered a pelvis injury in the past.

Schleese said he has made some progress in his attempt to bring saddle making into the mainstream of Canadian trades.

But he knows he still has some convincing left to do.

"There's still a long way to go. As it is now in Canada, if you can sew, you can call yourself a saddle maker."

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