

Have a conversation with master saddle fitter Danny Kroetch, owner and founder of DK Saddlery, and his passion for saddle fitting is immediately apparent and infectious. A lifelong horseman, Danny has rapidly gained worldwide recognition for his deep understanding of equine biomechanics and his no nonsense approach to saddle fitting. Based in Alberta Canada, DK Saddlery is the largest exporter of english saddles to Europe. DK saddles are used by equestrians on six continents, and by some of the world's top riders. In fact, three Olympic dressage riders representing two different countries rode in Danny's 'Freedom' saddle at this summer's Olympic Games.

Danny's lectures on saddle fitting are in high demand, and if you see him speak once you'll understand why. With his cowboy hat, mustache and lilting Canadian accent he looks the part of a cowboy roughened by a life outdoors. But that accent doesn't dampen the conviction in his words when he talks, or hide the deep well of knowledge that Danny possesses about saddles and saddle fitting. He spends most of the year traveling throughout the United States and the world giving clinics and saddle fitting lectures. His work with the University of Utrecht in Holland helped develop cutting edge technology in saddle fitting.

After attending a lecture of his in February at the 2004 CDS Annual Meeting I knew I would not soon forget the erudition that weighed heavy behind Danny's words. I wondered then where Danny got his immense well of motivation, and last month I had the opportunity to find out.

Erin: Danny, you've been around horses your whole life, but what was it that got you interested in saddle fitting?

Danny: I used to rodeo, and when I stopped

rodeoing I went West and started training . My wife Crystal is a dressage rider, and at the time we married I had 12 Quarter Horses. Well, my wife talked me into selling all 12 Quarter Horses to buy one Warmblood, and ever since then we've been breeding and training Warmbloods. I did the colt starting, and she finished them. I've also been running a boarding stable for 25 years, and at the same time I've worked with several farriers , as well as worked with a couple vets exclusively. That's where my interest grew in the biomechanics of horses and how muscle and bone structure interacts with the saddle. I started working with a saddler and learned how to disassemble and reassemble saddles, learning about the saddle from the inside out.

Erin: Is that when you decided to start your own saddle making company?

Danny: No, first I worked for another company, fitting saddles for 12 years and freelanced before that. I started DK Saddlery only one and a half years ago. I have two saddlers that work for me who make the saddles. Both of them are master saddle makers, one for 25 years and one for 15 years, and I am a master saddle fitter. We make saddles for all disciplines on an english tree; dressage, jumping, endurance and we also work with western saddles when fitting, however we don't make western saddles.

Erin: What is your basic saddle fitting philosophy?

Danny: I believe that in order to have harmony in riding, the saddle has to fit the rider correctly and the horse correctly to have harmony in movement. I can give you the best saddle in the world, but if it's not fitted right it doesn't mean nothing.

Erin: How did you end up working with the veterinary school at the University of Utrecht in Holland, where you collaborated with their prestigious veterinarian school in

a 15 month study on how ill fitting saddles affects the horse.

Danny: Well, I began doing saddle fitting clinics in Europe about three years ago. While I was there I was asked to lecture at the University of Utrecht's vet school, and Mr. Wimbuck Back, the dean of the veterinary school, was so impressed that he asked if I could lead a study on how ill fitting saddles affect horses. So we used 30 horses and tracked their movement and the pressure the saddle put on the back using a computerized saddle pad. We were trying to prove that an asymmetrical fit is far better than a symmetrical fit with pressure from the saddle. We took impressions of an asymmetrical saddle and then fit the saddle again with a symmetrical fit.

With the computerized saddle pad we could see the pressure that a symmetrical saddle put on the horse's back, both with and without a rider. The study proved a lot of things, but also raised a lot of questions for us.

Erin: But the air panel system that you use in your saddles certainly doesn't raise any questions for you, even though it is championed by some while others are skeptical on it's effectiveness. What sold you on using air panels?

Danny: Seven years ago I met with a gentleman from England who has the company that designs the air system (called Flair.) I was very skeptical at first, but I took three saddles and put the air system in them. Once you know how something's put together and how it works from the inside out you have a much deeper understanding of it. And once I put that saddle on a horse it totally made sense. Since then I have only sold air paneled saddles.

Erin: Can you explain exactly what makes air panels different than wool or foam flocked panels?

Danny: While wool or foam flocked panels sit rigid on the back, air panels move with the horse. The

tree is there to support the saddle from the front to back. And if I take a tree that the tree points do not fit right and throw a bunch of wool in ,this will not fix the problem. When the bone and muscle structure of the horse moves under the saddle it is important to have free range of movement. A wool flocked saddle creates little to lots of rigidity where as an air filled saddle allows the movement to happen with no resistance. I believe that until you understand the biomechanics and anatomy of the horse and its bone and muscle structure, you can't fit a saddle correctly.

Erin: What is the most important thing you look for when you fit a saddle?

Danny: When I fit a saddle to a horse, whether it's an Olympic level dressage horse or someone's backyard horse, I always look for the same things. I don't care about what the saddle looks like when the horse is standing, I care about it in motion. There are 19 different points in the horse's back that interact with the saddle in motion. When you have bone and muscle constantly moving under the saddle, everything changes.

The most important things to me in saddle fit to a horse are : how the tree point of the saddle interacts with the wither muscle and the shoulder of the horse, the saddle must be supported by the tree points properly not with wool or air. Then the saddle must be fit to the asymmetries of the horse(all horses are asymmetrical). This is the only way that you can make a saddle sit in perfect balance , front to back and side and side.

To me the 16 or 36 point saddle check is all smoke and mirrors. I show people the 3 main points for saddle check and from this they can easily asses if their saddle fits correctly.

Erin: You put a lot of importance in the material of the panels. Do you hold the other parts of the saddle in equal importance?

Danny: The tree is such an essential part of the saddle, and every part affects the horse in some way. Instead of wood trees, I use a synthetic tree with an adjustable gullet plate in my saddles, and for good reason. I can not stress enough the importance of an adjustable tree !

The air system is proven to allow the muscle structure of the horse to move much freer enabling him to build and change muscle faster. In three to six months after I've fit an air paneled saddle to a horse, the muscle structure will change so much that the horse will need adjusting . The wood and plastic trees have minimal to no adjustability. I'm very honest, and it's facts like this that I am very straightforward about. I tell them up front that they're better off with an adjustable tree. I refuse to put air into a plastic/wood rigid tree because it sits very rigid and is unchangeable. I don't work with wood trees because I don't believe that they work correctly, and I don't push anything I don't believe in. I don't want someone to have a problem six months down the road, and complain to me why can't you fit my saddle to my horse. My wife is a Grand Prix rider and a Level 3 coach. We run the largest training and showing facility in Alberta and I would not give something to her that I did not believe in. All of my customers believe in what I do also. I never veer off of my ethics and beliefs for the ever loving dollar. The most important thing is always going to be the comfort of the horse and rider, first and foremost.

Erin: When I saw you speak at the CDS Annual Meeting in Sacramento earlier this year, your words really left an impact on the entire audience. With the popularity of your lectures, how busy are you throughout

the year?

Danny: I travel around the world doing lectures and saddle fitting clinics. I can't do it alone of course, so I have others that work with me. There are 15 people in the U.S., three in Europe and two in Asia who work to schedule clinics and lectures in their part of the world. I try to make myself accessible to go to these areas often. It's hard being home only 60 days a year, so right now I'm trying to train a few good people who can go and do some of the fittings. Now, when people ask me to go here and there I have to refuse them sometimes, because if I can't get to someplace and service a saddle I've sold I won't sell it. One endurance rider drove her horse 12 hours to meet me, and said if that was what it would take to have me fit her into a saddle she was glad to do it.

Since I travel all around the world, some people wonder why I still go to small towns to fit saddles. A man in Winnipeg asked me that, and I said, 'because you have sore backed horses here that need the help.' To me it's not how big the location is, or how good the riders are, if people are interested in having me and I have the time then I will try to make it to them.

Erin: Many of us here in the states wouldn't think that there was a significant equine population in a place like Hong Kong, and yet you make regular trips there to fit saddles?

Danny: Yes, I go to Asia twice a year and visit China, Hong Kong and Thailand. FEI judge Alison King lives in Hong Kong. I also have been asked to teach a master saddle fitters course in Europe, and I've done four lectures in Holland at Durna which is one of the largest riding academies in Holland.

But it's worth it to go to all these places, because my goal is always to make the horse comfortable. That's what it's all about to me.

Erin: Your Circle of Influence lecture points out the parts of a very important equation for the success of the horse. Can you tell me more about the Circle of Influence?

Danny: I started doing the Circle of Influence talk three years ago. To me, the Circle of Influence encompasses everything. It is so important for the farrier, trainer, veterinarian, equine dentist, owner and saddle fitter to work hand in hand. So often the farrier won't communicate with the vet, the saddler won't communicate with the trainer, and so on. A saddle won't make an Olympic horse or rider. Each element put together creates a circle of influence to the horse and rider that's critical.

While a vet is in school for seven years, they might only study the feet or the teeth for three weeks. That makes it so important for each specialist to collaborate and contribute their specific knowledge.

I have a very big passion for what I do. The horse is talking to us all the time, but we don't always listen. The one thing a horse has never been taught to do is lie. I want to give people enough knowledge so that they want to know more.

Erin: Danny, what do you have to say to the people who can't afford a custom made saddle? Do you work with riders of all budgets?

Danny: You know, lots of people think that because I make my own saddles, I won't look at their saddles. But once again, it's not about the money, it's about the comfort of the horse, and not everyone can afford to buy a brand new custom saddle.

I do carry corrective pads, because if someone can't afford a saddle, I try and help them out in the best way I can. If I can help the horse be a little more comfortable then it's worth it. I'm a saddle fitter because that's what it's about.

If I can come to you and palpate your horse and show you where your horse is sore, then fix that area of discomfort, and you can get on and feel the difference in ten minutes, there's no fault to you because you didn't know any better. But if I show you and you do nothing about it, then shame on you because you're riding your horse knowing you're hurting him.

I do clinics where I'll put people in their original saddle and show the audience how the horse is moving, and then put a properly fitted saddle on and show where the change has occurred. Everybody can see the change, and then when I put the rider back into their saddle, the rider can feel it too.

Erin: What is your definition of a great saddle fitter?

Danny: A great saddle fitter can tell you all about the muscle structure that moves when the horse is in motion. A great saddle fitter also understands the biomechanics of the horse. When I walk up to a horse I can look at him and tell you how he moves and how you sit without seeing either of you move. A good saddle fitter is someone who completely understands about biomechanics movement, because then and only then can you fit a saddle for that horse correctly, so that it isn't going to interfere with that horse in motion.

I've trained my eye to see what most riders can only feel. When I go into a ring I am looking through more than just the eye of the saddle fitter. I'm also looking at the horse's biomechanics - for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. So many saddle fitters don't even watch people ride. What they don't understand is that you have to watch everything move to make sure you've got the correct fit. To understand how everything is connected, you have to look at all the parts together as a whole. It is more technical than most people think it is. I don't analyze the saddle at the halt or the walk. I look at it in the trot, because that is when you can see it

all.

The Freedom saddle was designed because I wanted to free the horse and rider in every way. From my past experiences as a saddle fitter and seeing all the problems that happen to horses and riders I needed a saddle that was totally adjustable. The seat, cantle and twist are designed to help the rider fall into the proper position. The panel and billeting system was designed to allow complete "freedom" to the horse. When we have a proper fitted saddle to horse and rider we then have true harmony.

Erin: That's a good point. Well Danny, I believe we've run out of space, but it's been a pleasure speaking with you. Where can people find out more information about you and your schedule?

Danny: Anyone can go to my web site, www.DKsaddlery.com. Thanks a lot!