

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 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 the Athens Olympic Games.

Danny's lectures on saddle fitting are also 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, or hide the deep well of knowledge he possesses. Danny spends most of the year traveling throughout the United States and the world giving clinics and saddle fitting lectures. His work has led him to the University of Utrecht in Holland where he helped develop cutting edge technology in saddle fitting.

After attending one of Danny's lectures in February at the 2004 CDS Annual Meeting I knew I would not soon forget the message behind Danny's words. I wondered then where Danny got his 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: When I was young I used to rodeo and when I stopped I started training horses. My wife Crystal is a dressage rider, and at the time we got 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 started all of the young horses, and Crystal continued their training. As a couple we've run a boarding stable for over 25 years, during which time we worked with several farriers and veterinarians on a consistent basis. That's where my interest in the biomechanics and saddle-fitting began. 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: First I freelanced then I spent 12 years fitting saddles for a large German saddle maker , finally, 18 months ago I started my own company DK Saddlery. I have two saddlers who make the saddles I design. Both of them are master saddlers with 25 and 15 years respectively. Together we make saddles for all disciplines on an english tree; dressage, jumping, endurance and we will fit western saddles, however, we don't make them.

Erin: What is your basic saddle fitting philosophy?

Danny: I believe that in order to create harmony between horse and rider the saddle has to fit correctly. I can give you the best saddle in the world, but if it's not fitted correctly it doesn't do the horse or rider much good.

Erin: How did you end up working with 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: 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. Wim Back, the dean, was so impressed that he asked if I would lead a study on how ill-fitting saddles affect horses. In the study we used 30 horses and tracked their movement and the pressure of the saddle using a computerized saddle pad. Our hypothesis was that due to the fact that a horse's anatomy was asymmetrical that an asymmetrical fitting saddle is far better than a symmetrical fit. We took impressions of an asymmetrical saddle and then a symmetrical fitting saddle. 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 our hypothesis was true, 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 its effectiveness. What sold you on using air panels?

Danny: Seven years ago I met with a gentleman from England who owns the company that designs the Flair air system. I was skeptical at first, but I agreed to try the air system in three of my saddles. Once I understood how the air panels worked from the inside out and put a 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: Wool or foam flocked panels sit rigid on the horse's back, whereas air panels move with the horse. It is important to have free range of movement and an air filled saddle allows the movement to happen with no resistance. The air system is also important and has been proven to enable the horse to build and change muscle faster over the back. Within three to six months of fitting an air-paneled saddle to a horse, the muscle size and shape over the back will change so much that the saddle will require adjusting.

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 still, I care about how the saddle impacts the horse in motion. There are 19 different points in the back that interact with the saddle while the horse is in motion. The most important things to me are;

- How do the tree points of the saddle interact with the wither muscle and shoulder of the horse?
- Is the saddle supported by the tree points properly?
- Is the saddle 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 to 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 assess 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: Every element of the saddle affects the horse in some way, the tree is as important as the panels in that it affects how well the saddle will fit the horse as he grows and develops. I use a synthetic tree with an adjustable gullet plate in all of my saddles.

Wood and plastic trees have minimal to no adjustability. I tell my clients up front that they are better off with an adjustable tree and I will refuse to put air panels into a saddle with a plastic or wood tree. I don't want someone to have a problem six months down the road and be unable to fix it because I cannot adjust the tree to fit the horse.

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?

Danny: I travel around the world giving lectures and saddle fitting clinics. I have 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 as often as possible. It's hard being home only 60 days a year, so at the moment I'm trying to train a few good people who can do some of the fittings. Because of my schedule it is sometimes impossible for me to agree to every invitation to speak or do a clinic. 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. 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 and I am happy to help her and her students by ensuring their saddles fit properly and their horses are happy working under them.

Erin: Can you tell me more about the Circle of Influence you talk about in your lectures?

Danny: To me, the Circle of Influence is a wholistic approach to both saddle fitting and the overall health and happiness of the working horse. I believe it is important for the farrier, trainer, veterinarian, equine dentist, owner and saddle fitter to work hand in hand. A saddle won't make an Olympic horse or rider but each element helps maintain a balance of health and comfort for the horse and rider that's critical. This is why it is so important that owners include each specialist to collaborate and contribute their specific knowledge in helping to create an environment where the horse can willingly offer his natural talents to the rider.

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: I understand not everyone can afford to buy a brand new custom saddle. For this reason I carry corrective pads, although they're not ideal, they may alleviate some of the discomfort for the horse.

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

Danny: A great saddle fitter can tell you what is happening under the saddle when the horse is in motion and who completely understands the biomechanics of the horse. It is more technical than most people think it is. I don't just analyze the saddle at the halt or the walk. I look at it in the trot, because that is when you can see exactly how the saddle is impacting the horse and the rider at work.

I designed the Freedom saddle because in order to correctly fit horses and riders I needed a saddle that was totally adjustable. Now I have a product that I can adjust perfectly for each individual horse and rider, and will continue to evolve with the development of the horse.

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: My schedule and more information about my saddles are available on my web site at www.dksaddlery.com. Thanks a lot!



The Freedom Saddle
designed by Dan Kroetch
of DK Saddlery