

Gene Freeze & County Saddlery: It Takes a Team

By *Lauren R. Giannini*



Gene training an international group of County representatives.
Photo courtesy of County Saddlery

You see it all the time: riders blaming themselves or their horses for something that isn't either's fault. I love to design for clients who think that a saddle can't make a huge difference in soundness and performance," said Gene Freeze, owner and designer of County Saddlery Inc., the custom saddle-manufacturing firm based in England. "I see so many horses fighting their saddles, resulting in so many riders fighting their horses."

Gene tells it like it is, because he cares about the horses and he's aware of the issues in today's horse world. "Imagine reducing the number of sharpies [hypodermic needles] in the bin or the endless lunging before a class," he said. "Imagine jumping horses that recover their balance quicker after landing and having a more consistent pace. Of course, the saddle is not always the problem, but often it is."

County Saddlery offers high-level competition designs for

performance horses. "When you make saddles with the intention of making the best saddle in the world, you aren't just making saddles for the best in the world — it's for every horse and rider," said Gene. "Everybody aspires to be the best they can be, whatever their sport. The process, the journey is exciting. No one should be excluded. If you don't give them and their horse a fair chance, they'll never know how good they can be."

Founded 40-plus years ago, County saddles are sold in more than 30 countries. In 1978, Gene introduced County to the U.S. during the World Three-Day Eventing Championships

at the brand new Kentucky Horse Park. The entire inventory of County Saddles sold out.

"At County, we view ourselves as part of a team," said Gene. "We feel that it's extremely important when possible to work closely with the trainer, vet, body worker and others, who combine their knowledge to produce the best results for the horse and rider. More and more vets are becoming

interested in the mechanics of saddle fit. Some, like Dr. Steve Engle in Wellington, Florida, have studied the cause and effect of poor saddle design and fit for years."

Gene has designed and fitted saddles for some of the world's best riders: Edward Gal, triple gold medalist and 2010 Dressage World Champion of The Netherlands; Pan Am show jumping medalist and Olympian Margie Engle, the American Grand Prix Association's only 10-time Rider of the Year; Leslie Burr Howard, American Olympic gold and silver medalist; and U.S. Olympic dressage medalist Robert Dover, to name a few.

What's Inside County Really Counts

"We've tried every material in the world, from synthetic to natural," said Gene. "Although we could make saddles cheaper and faster using high-tech materials, we simply can't get the results we want. We resisted the trend toward synthetic pre-formed panels, because they can't conform to the horse's back and when you need to, you can't adjust them. For that reason, we use laminated beech wood trees and pure wool flock. Horses' backs come in many shapes, and they go through changes as a result of training, food, injury, age, weight gain and loss. Off the rack and on the back or one size fits all is unrealistic and pads don't solve the problems."

Gene suggests having the fit and flocking checked once or twice a year by one of County's experienced representatives or a qualified saddle fitter. The good news is that, when needed, a relatively inexpensive adjustment can be made. As for using a tool to open or close the head (pommel) to make it narrower or wider, County Saddlery doesn't follow that practice.

"We think it weakens the tree, can cause rocking, and doesn't really address the many other aspects of fit as a horse changes," said Gene. "That's why we have proprietary designs for the components that go into building our saddles."

In other words, it's really what's inside a County saddle that counts the most, and Gene's



Gene at his First Choice Farm in Woodbine, Maryland.
Photo by Natalia Kostikova



Gene working with his Grand Prix horse under German Dressage trainer Felicitas von Neuman-Cosel.
 Photo by Natalia Kostikova

not inclined to reveal their design secrets. County saddles are made using traditional methods and painstaking craftsmanship. If bling's your heart's desire, just ask: Swarovski Crystals or patent leather, no problem.

Roots of His Design Theories

Gene grew up in the horse industry, helping his father who bred show ponies, and also competed to the upper levels in eventing. After riding in a Selections Trial, a bad fall prompted some changes. A contributor to *Equus* magazine in its early years and a farrier with many FEI clients, Gene was commissioned to do a groundbreaking study with wild horses on natural hoof balance. Gene's findings were featured in "Farriery: The Whole Horse Concept," published in 2007 and written by British farrier David W. Gill.

German dressage rider Suzanne von Dietze, co-author of "Rucksicht auf den Reiterrücken"

("Back to Back") stated:
 "More than anyone
 I have ever met,
 Gene's

background and experience gives him truly unique understanding of how to achieve balance, from the top of the horse to the bottom of the horse."

Saddle design became Gene's passion. He belongs to the British Society of Master Saddlers and serves as president and chief instructor for the Masters Saddlers Association in the U.S. His presentations to veterinarians and horse owners, scheduled around the world, receive excellent feedback.

Dr. K. Feige of the University of Zurich, Switzerland, stated: "Veterinarians actually do not have a special education in saddlery and therefore could profit from Gene's outstanding knowledge. He gave an excellent presentation ... to horse owners and veterinarians ... informative and easy to understand. I recommend Gene Freeze without hesitation."

That he's dedicated to improving saddle fit for horses and riders is obvious from his straightforward way of speaking. "Consumers are fed up. They've been burned too often," said Gene. "If the saddle isn't working, try something else. The horse deserves not to work in discomfort or pain. We aren't into fads. When it comes to our products, it's about results in terms of soundness, performance and the partnership between horse and rider."

Real-Time Test

Gene and his team prefer that riders and trainers try their saddles, then try a County immediately afterward — whenever possible, without pads to mask results. They want to see the horse move freely and relax its back quickly.

"If we can't improve the performance, there's no reason to change," said Gene. "Horses tell us what's going on. They often wring their tails, grind their teeth, try to bite when the rider approaches with a saddle. This isn't about attitude. It's about anticipation: here they come with an instrument of torture ... Great riders can ride a horse through pain, but great horsemen seek to eliminate it. The last thing you want to do is punish your horse for reacting to pain."

Gene's take: there's nothing to lose, everything to gain — get your horse out of pain. "I think we have to avoid the mindset, referred to as the "precedent affliction" that we've always done things this way; it worked in the past, it will work in the future," he said. "It's certainly in your horse's interest to keep an open mind to new possibilities. At County, we say: Your horse is even better than you think, but you have to give him a chance. At the end of the day, however, results, not marketing, should decide what you do, and your horse should be the final arbiter." ❧

For more information, visit www.countysaddlery.com.

About the writer: Lauren R. Giannini is an award-winning journalist and avid photographer, specializing in stories about the equestrian world, wildlife and conservation. Lauren lives in the heart of Horse Country Virginia, watched over by her CEO (canine executive officer), a rescue who sums up perfectly the term "hybrid vigor." Lauren's pleasures and pastimes include horses, travel, especially to Kenya, and writing about wildlife, conservation and eco-tourism. Books are next on her to-do list.



Shown: Solution Jumping Saddle