

Peter Horobin Saddlery



IMAGE: Peter (R) and Rhys (L) in the workshop.

An iconic bespoke Saddler in Australia

If Peter Horobin were a breed of horse, he would be classified as 'extremely rare'. 'Rare', because he is one of only a handful of Saddlers left who design and manufacture their own bespoke range of saddles in Australia.

WORDS: Manon Strachan



IMAGE: Peter on board 'Angkor' in Schwanewede, Germany. 1978.

It was the 1970s, and Peter's father Keith was a very successful flat race and jumps jockey in Australia. After a devastating fall that saw Keith break his neck, the family decided to relocate Peter and his three younger siblings to Hanover, Germany, so that Keith could recuperate.

While based in Hanover, Peter started his jockey apprenticeship at age 15. He spent his young adult years travelling and riding through England, Germany, and France. He won over 50 races and was classed as Germany's top amateur rider.

In Germany Peter also started an apprenticeship of another sort at one of the world's largest and oldest Master Saddlers at the time - Passier. He was a mere 16 years old and had the world at his feet.

Peter says, "When I first started at Passier I just saw it as a job. But then the more I got into it, the more the trade became my passion."

"During my apprenticeship, I was asked to make a bridle for the President of Argentina, which was awarded to him at a ceremony in Germany. It was a pretty daunting task for a boy of my age."

"I completed my saddle making apprenticeship and by that time I was over six-foot tall and had become too heavy to continue as a jockey."

"My whole family decided to return to Australia and I had pretty much already decided that being a saddler was my career path, so I started my own business in 1985."

When Peter arrived back in Australia, the business he first started was known as Ozzie Design Saddlery. Eventually he would change the name to Peter Horobin Saddlery (PHS), and he would go on to become one of Australia's most iconic and successful saddlers.

In 1985 Peter met his now wife, Julie, at a local disco on the Mornington Peninsula. Julie was a nurse and they hit it off immediately. Together they had two children, Marlee and Rhys.

PHS is very much a family affair with Rhys now not only manufacturing saddles but also on the road undertaking saddle fittings. With Peter's support, Marlee is focussed on building the PHS brand overseas in countries such as New Zealand, Japan, Austria, Switzerland, UK and Denmark.

Julie is focussed on the administration side of the business and describes her role as, "making sure Peter is where he needs to be at the time he needs to be." Family values are core to the success of the PHS brand.

"Our business has been built on the same values we share as a family – honesty, transparency, and a passion for what we do. We also have fun in our family and in our business – it is after all a lifestyle choice for us."

"Sometimes it can be hard being part of a family business – we spend so much time together and sometimes we do disagree on certain aspects."

"We have got very good as a family at addressing problems as soon as they arise. We then work as a team to implement the best way to deal with the problem and then move on," says Peter.

Peter has trained and mentored Rhys in the art of saddle manufacturing and fitting and is quite rightly proud of his son's involvement.



IMAGE: Peter on board 'Bonito' in Hanover. 1978.

He says, "Rhys has stepped up in the business, and I am proud to see him out saddle fitting. He is really good at what he does, and the way he treats our customers with patience and respect is so wonderful to see. Our customers like him; he is a great kid."

"As a family owned business it is important to us that our saddles are sold and marketed on the principle of each one being of exceptional quality, supported by outstanding customer service, and transparency and honesty in everything we do."

"Driven by a passion for our work, we hope this reflects in our product and the way we deal with customers. I also hope that this makes our customers feel passionate and excited about buying one of our saddles. We want it to be a special and unique experience - a rewarding experience you could say."

As a jockey, it seemed logical to Peter that making saddles for the racing industry was the place to initially focus his business and from the outset he designed each of the different racing saddles from the ground up.

He explains, "When I first started out, I designed and manufactured my own brand of racing saddle and in the process brought together the best of what I had experienced from riding in them while in Europe."

"I collaborated a lot with participants in the racing industry, so I could bring something to the market that was more advantageous than what was available at the time."

It was the racing industry in which Peter was able to establish the PHS brand as a market leader. It was also inevitable that the innovative Peter would expand his product offering by designing and manufacturing dressage and show jumping saddles.

"Once we had decided to expand into manufacturing dressage and show jumping saddles, I started the design process. Designing and developing the tree of a saddle alone can take up to two years. Once the tree is finalised, the saddle can be built and

tested. Testing requires 'bums on seats', and can be a time-consuming process."

"Each saddle is tested to an international standard for flexibility and strength and along the way we gather feedback about what needs to be fine-tuned," he says.

Peter has always had a strong interest in the mechanics of both people and horses and has spent a lifetime researching the anatomy of both as he strides to develop and manufacture innovative designs.

Sometimes inspiration can come from unexpected, but logical, quarters.

"The concept and inspiration for the PH Amazone came from the female bicycle seat. It was a revolutionary innovation at the time. I knew the anatomy of the rider and the effects of the pelvis in both females and males so set about inventing what we called the female friendly saddle."

"The saddle was also designed so that the gullet and the panels could be adjusted. I didn't realise it would take off so successfully and that its nickname would stick forever," he says.

The PH Amazone went on to become one of Peter's biggest selling saddles, and it opened the door to an unprecedented level of uptake by many top riders and equestrians in general who still own and ride in his saddles.

With a humility that defines Peter, he says, "I remember going to my very first trade show at Clarendon, and someone asked me the question, "Who rides in your saddles?" I was embarrassed at the time to say, "No one."

"Since then I have had Olympic riders, Australian Grand Prix riders in both dressage and jumping, the horse of the century in Denmark, top instructors, equine professionals of all disciplines, and Melbourne Cup winning jockeys all ride in my saddles."

"It is very humbling that these riders have all chosen

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IMAGE: Peter Horobin.

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the saddles I've designed and manufactured. To be able to take your own creation to the market and have it roundly supported is touching beyond words."

"The brand simply wouldn't be where it is today without the support of my customers."

With so many brands available to equestrians, competing on a global stage is not easy for any saddle manufacturer, and indeed, you could argue that the tyranny of distance makes it that much harder for an Australian manufacturer to succeed overseas.

Peter explains, "We've done an excellent job of marketing and selling our range of saddles overseas. It is hard work for us because we are further away from the action. However, it just means we have to go the extra mile to be successful."

"When compared to the USA or European market, the Australian market is incredibly small, and it is a tough business. Outside of Australia, Denmark and New Zealand are our leading countries of presence."

"We feel that the time is right to not only expand our activities in these countries but to also expand to other countries as well."

The family environment that Peter has built and operates in extends to those who work with him both in Australia and overseas. It is a global team

that shares the same values as the Horobin family – in business and life.

"Countries like Japan, for example, are very focused on culture and respect. It takes a long time to enter a market like Japan, and you have to earn the trust of the Japanese people."

"We are very lucky that like-minded people in those countries have approached us. I think this is the only way we can be successful in some of these countries in the long term."

"If I had to break down how to successfully compete globally to a few critical aspects, it would be honesty in business, providing good quality, good service, and the willingness to adapt and be loyal," he says.

As an exporter and importer of goods, Peter has had to ride through the ups and downs of exchange rate fluctuations and the impact it has had on his business across the years.

The global financial crisis in 2008 delivered an unexpected and significant increase in sales to PHS, which continues to rise to this day.

As a family owned business, full control is retained over the prices of their products ensuring they can respond to any currency fluctuations instantly.

It is fair to say the way in which consumers purchase products and specifically, the time they are willing

to wait for delivery has changed significantly since Peter started out in business.

No matter what products are being purchased, and from where - as consumers we live in a 'now' society - we simply want everything now.

This evolution has meant that Peter has also had to adapt to how he offers and delivers his product range to the consumer market.

He says, "Riders don't want to wait for a saddle anymore. Once upon a time, it would take up to 12 weeks to make a saddle from scratch, and people would just wait."

"Nowadays most people want to be in their new saddle within 24 hours. Thankfully we can now complete a saddle in around three days."

"With new technology, a whole lot of experience, and innovation, we've been able to design our saddles so it not only makes it a lot easier for us to manufacture quickly to different horse shapes but have made it easier to change and adapt them onsite making it more convenient for the customer."

"We've divided our services into two to cater for this. We have the 'Tailor Made' range, which are saddles that are readily available and can be adjusted on site."

"The other is our 'Bespoke Range', which is entirely



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custom built from start to finish. Our customers have the option to purchase off the shelf, or custom made, depending on how much in a hurry they are.”

“We also continue to make some fascinating bespoke saddles. For example, I have just finished making some crocodile skin race saddles for one of Australia’s champion jockeys, Hugh Bowman, and I’m about to start making an ostrich skin saddle for a customer in Austria.”

With an almost unlimited range of goods and services available to equestrians, consumers have also been faced with the decision of whether to choose fast delivery of an average quality product or wait a little longer for a high-quality product.

“I’ve seen many riders go through the process of buying cheaper saddles because they can get instant delivery, only to realise after a relatively short period of time that they don’t last.”

“They then revert to purchasing quality products that do go the distance. I think the philosophy of buying well once still holds true.”

“Many years ago we would worry when a new, inferior, brand of saddle came out that was significantly cheaper than ours. You’d hear all the talk about it, and we would get concerned that we might lose sales.”

“But now the industry has grown so much, and we have remained true to our philosophy of providing quality products so our business has remained constant,” he says.

In the same way consumer buying behaviours have evolved, so have the tools and technology that allow Peter to make his range of saddles. Regardless of how or where the saddles are produced, saddle

making is still considered to be a trade that is learnt. Over the past 30 years, Peter has trained over 20 ‘stitchers’ and saddle apprentices.

He says, “Saddlers are just like tailors. At PHS, we manufacture our saddles in accordance with the German system - the way in which it is done at Passier. Each person has a particular job, or part of the process to do and they do just that part. It is a production line of pieces that are put together.”

“The English way since the age of dawn is to have one person make a saddle from start to finish. And it was like that because it was common to have a Saddler on every corner.”

“Of course, there are many different tools to make the process easier - like laser cutting machines for leather which automates the cutting out process rather than us cutting by hand, but a lot of it is still very manual.”

In his workshop on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, Peter has an impressive collection of saddle manufacturing equipment from extremely sharp knives to stuffing irons. His prized possession is a set of original tools from a saddler in New South Wales that you can no longer be bought.

“After we’ve finished with the tools, Rhys’ and my job is to ensure at the very end of the saddle manufacturing process all of the custom specifications to fit the horse are implemented. This requires skill and knowledge not only of the product but the horse and rider anatomy.”

“This is where it is extremely important for saddle fitting to be of an exceptional standard.”

“To this day, I still teach my work colleagues to do things to the highest of standards with the best



IMAGE: The Horobin family. L-R - Peter, Rhys, Julie, Marlee (sitting).

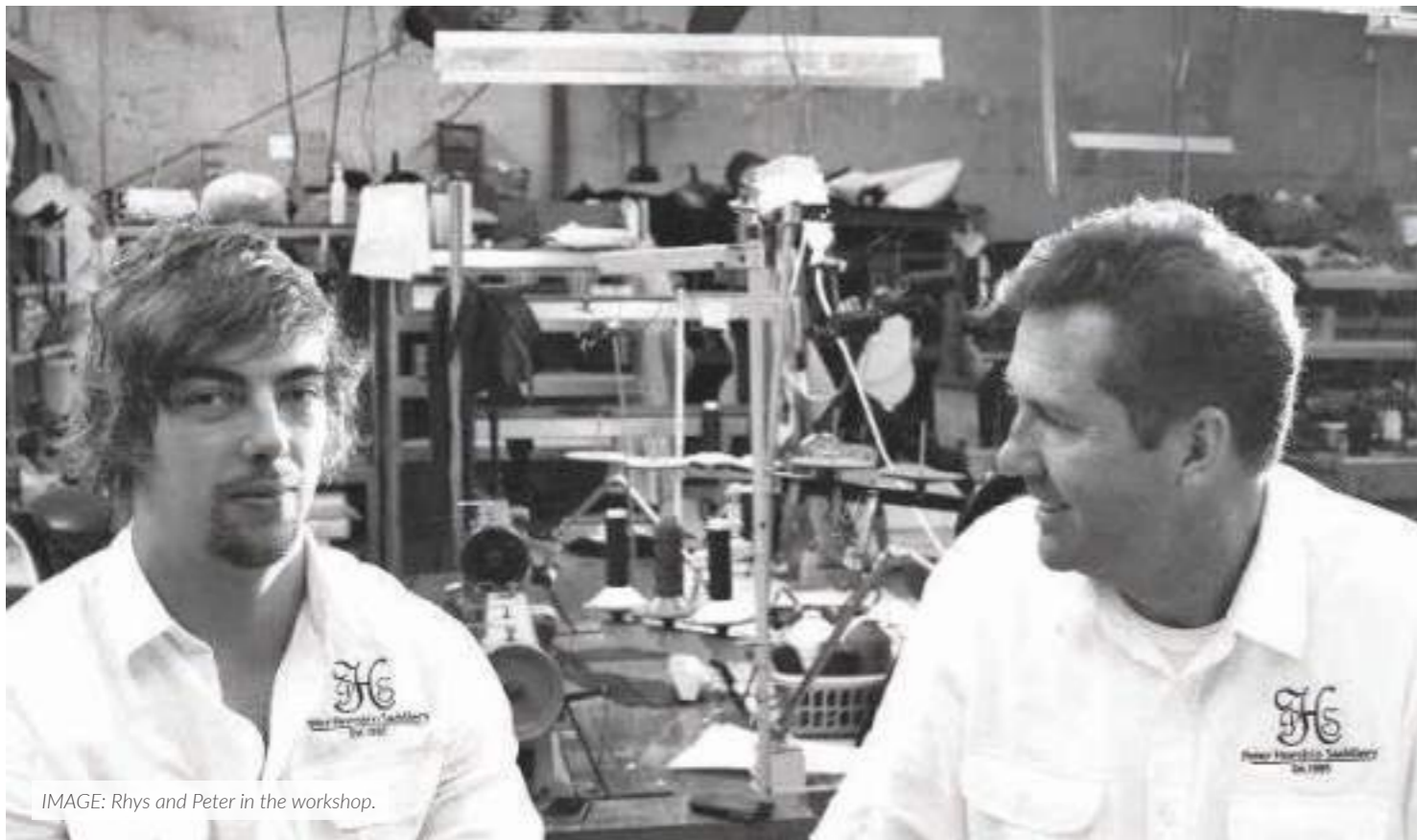


IMAGE: Rhys and Peter in the workshop.

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IMAGE: Peter laying out leather hides.

quality materials which are sustainable and ethically sourced,” he explains.

Peter has spent considerable time finding the best quality ethical materials needed to make saddles while keeping an eye on sustainability. While most materials are relatively easy to source, it is the essential ingredient that remains an ongoing challenge to secure - leather.

“We use 100% leather, and it used to be all Australian leather, but we no longer use it as it tends to be scarred due to our harsh climatic conditions. We don't use any synthetic materials, nor do we use 'super soft' leather because it doesn't provide the longevity we like to see in our saddles.”

“There is a worldwide shortage of leather and as a result, prices have gone up, and as the population grows so does the demand. At the moment, we are sourcing our leather from Italy and Germany. Both countries are considered to have the best quality and the best supply,” he says.

Peter admires the changes the younger generation are making in the sustainability sector and the responsibility they take for their purchases. Marlee and Rhys have been instrumental in educating Peter on the importance of sustainability. It is an education that has led Peter to ask questions about where and how the raw materials he uses are made.

He says, “Consumer opinion is no longer based on how the product looks but also on the way the product is made, how it is made, and who has made it. The eco age is here and the question of 'where my saddle is made and how is my saddle made' continues to be asked.”

“This requires education about the products the customer is buying and a social responsibility by the manufacturers of the products. For example, I can now buy ethically made waxed thread which is sealed with a natural wax which is more environmentally friendly.”

“The patent leather we use for our race saddles is of the finest quality and made with the most ethical standards. The equestrian leather comes from Germany with the highest standard of tanning operations applied.”

“We've also been affected by the behaviour of some of the larger fashion houses. For example, Prada

and Gucci have been forced to address the problem surrounding ethical leather.”

“They are under pressure from the consumer and activists of ethical manufacturing to take action. They have the power and resources to address this problem and do something about it. This then travels down the chain of manufacturers using leather including ourselves.”

Marketing his saddles to a new generation that prefers ethically produced goods is something that the PHS team has taken on board, and the team has moved away from how they traditionally marketed their saddles.

It is now rare for the PHS brand to be promoted with an iconic rider featured sitting in one of his saddles. Instead, his marketing has shifted to focus on the product features and the service they offer.

Peter says, “Rather than focus on 'who is riding in what,' we've moved to looking at promoting the 'why.' Riders choose my saddles for a broad range of reasons, and it is those reasons that other riders love too, so it makes sense to us that we focus on positioning our saddles around those concepts.”

“One motto I have always gone by is that if riders love my saddles, then I am open to ideas. I'll quite often say to riders let's collaborate, let's experiment with a joint venture on how to improve the product.”

Since the inception of PHS, Peter and his team have literally manufactured and sold thousands of saddles around the world, but it is the saddles he used to make for daughter Marlee, that he is very affectionate about.

“There are a few saddles out in the equestrian world that I made for Marlee. They have Marlee stamped on them, and I see them around now and then.”

“I get all emotional when I see them because I made so many for her and her ponies. It's like seeing her life story in play because every time I see one, it reminds me of each point in her life when I made them.”

“I spent countless hours teaching Marlee how to keep them clean and look after them, and as soon as they were worn in - despite Marlee's disapproval - I would cheekily sell them on second hand! Back in those days, the solid leather took a little longer to

wear in, unlike the leather we use now, so they were always in demand," he says with a hearty laugh.

Peter Horobin Saddles has come a long way since its beginnings in 1985, and the future continues to look very bright for the family owned business despite the competitive environment they operate in.

While Peter will continue to ensure that they remain a niche and bespoke Saddler with quality craftsmanship at the core of their values, the team will continue to expand their business.

"The most exciting innovation we are working on is the development of our 'StrideFree' tree which has been incorporated in my exercise and racing saddles since 2014."

"It has been a passion of mine to improve saddles in the racing industry for the benefit and welfare of the horse."

The StrideFree saddle works on the principal of having longer and broad-based tree points that have curved edges which allows freedom for the shoulder of the horse to rotate. It is an award-winning design that Peter is keen to develop and market further.

"In 2014 the tree design won the International Trade Award at Beta in the United Kingdom and since then the saddles have been hugely embraced by the racing industry in France, the UK, and other parts of Europe."

"It was a natural evolution for us to incorporate the same tree in a new and exciting show jumping saddle that we have called the StrideFree Melbourne," he says.

Attributes that set Peter apart from many other manufacturers is his continual dedication to innovation and his passion for designing and bringing new products to market. These are embraced by the whole family.

"We are always onto something new. I drive Marlee mad sometimes because I am always thinking of the next design, the next adventure!"

"Just recently I was telling one of my racing customers about some great riding boots I'd love to develop for the sector."

"All I could hear was Marlee saying, "Dad - we are not selling riding boots! Do you know how much time it would take to market them, sell them, and store them?"

"I once studied to become a pilot as I'd always wanted to fly but I think I could also have been a surgeon. Well, I do have a very steady hand as a stitcher, so maybe I should have pursued that career rather than drive Marlee mad with my ideas all the time," he says laughing heartily.

Despite his passion for innovation, Peter also recognises that the family has to be realistic about what they can produce and focus their energy on, and what they cannot. He also believes that it is important to foster great ideas and not dismiss them.

The story behind the global success of PHS is one of innovation, strong values, passion, and hard work. While Peter and the team at PHS may form part of a rare breed of Australian made Saddlers, there is no doubt that the world is their oyster, and they will continue to reap the rewards. [EQM](#)

Disclosure - Equine Magazine did not receive any products or services from Peter Horobin Saddlery in return for this feature. All images © Peter Horobin Saddlery.



IMAGE: Peter designing a new saddle.



IMAGE: Peter Horobin saddles on show at Equitana.