



RIDING HIGH IN THE SADDLE

John Lordan is one of Australia's true master saddlers. Discovering his craft at an early age on the Queensland border, he later became apprentice to the man who initially showed him the ropes. Constantly fine-tuning his skills and taking pride in every job, John has created more than 450 saddles that are widely sought after throughout the country. LISA MINNER talks to John about his passion for creating signature saddles.

WITH less than 50 master saddlers in Australia, Dubbo can claim one of the very best as its own. John Lordan has been making saddles professionally for more than 25 years and is considered by peers and clients to be a true craftsman who takes pride in every part of the saddle-making process.

Humble as John is about his reputation, friend and fellow life-long saddler Bruce Tagett, who has himself saddled up the likes of Jack Thompson and Patrick Swayze, believes John's "the best saddler in Australia".

"He's a perfectionist – even his missus will tell you that," he says, grinning. Bruce points out the 'polish' and 'stitching' in a saddle John's in the process of finishing. Even to the untrained eye, it's not only functional but a lovingly made piece that warrants a closer look.

"It speaks for itself. Have a look at that for workmanship," Bruce marvels, eyeing the detail.

Like many specialist craftsmen, John's interest in saddle making came about as a child. Visits out to a property near Hungerford on the Queensland border exposed him to neighbour Ross Wallace, a saddler, and laid the groundwork for what would later become his own profession.

In times of drought Ross would open his workshop, repairing and making saddles for locals.

"I use to go out there in school holidays – catch the bus from Dubbo to Bourke and Ross would take me to the property," he says, "I wasn't always in the workshop, sometimes I was out on the property doing other things too, but that's where it started for me."

Due to the droughts of the late 70s, Ross sold his property and set up shop as a saddler in Dubbo. This gave John the opportunity to do an apprenticeship when he finished school and was employed with his mentor for ten years.

TAKING the leap into his own saddlery business, John started working from a shed at home. To attract the type of customers he was looking for, he used to travel on weekends to campdrafts and polo-cross meetings, pitch a tent and show his saddles to potential buyers. This established him and his

business has thrived ever since. With 450 saddles under his belt, John has orders lined up already until 2013. In addition to making saddles, a large part of his work is also making bridles, belts, and other accessories.

"There's no shortage of work, I can barely keep up with it," he says.

STUDYING the types of saddles being made in the early days, John strived to make his own more unique, to give them a "signature". He started from the ground up and began experimenting with the frame or what's known in saddlery circles as the 'tree'. Again, a process which was initially time consuming and took a fair bit of tweaking and tuning, his 'trees' are now perfected and most importantly allow movement in the saddle, which makes them comfortable for both horse and rider.

John brings out a rare, old English tree, made from wood, cloth and steel, and explains that he now uses plastic and steel for his saddle frames.

"Most saddlers buy fibreglass or a steel and wood combination, but they are more restricted with what they can do with them," he says. "I can make the tree with the influence of what I want to do with the saddle."

Being able to make his own trees is a big advantage and John believes a lot of saddlers are regretting not learning how to make them.

"Making trees is a bit like making saddles. You can't just pick it up. There's not a straight line on them, it's all done by eye and looking at the angles," he explains. "I just look at it and know it's the right angle."

The art of tree making also allows him to customise the saddle to suit the horse or the rider, for example some horses are wider than others or some riders who are over 120 kgs need the saddle to "position the weight of the rider forward", which allows the horse to carry the person more comfortably. John makes the comparison of a pair of custom-made leather shoes against a stiff pair off the shelf. The flexibility in designing the tree and saddle to suit the situation has become ►

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► another quality which has made his saddles so highly sought.

"When you're riding a horse you don't give many signals through your hands. Most of your signals are through your feet and your bum, and as such, it's really happening here." He gestures to his hips. "That's why the movement in the tree is important – a good tree or foundation gives the rider a big advantage."

RECOGNISING the speciality of his craft, John believes that in this line of work "you don't really know what you're doing until you've been at it at least ten years". He believes you can have a lot of training but things just need to eventually click, and these breakthroughs come after long years of trial and error.

"You eventually get to know just by looking at something if it's right – you don't have to measure it or feel it," he explains. "You just know."

Because good quality saddles take time

to make (one saddle takes him around three and a half weeks) and because "there's only so many to go around", John's saddles when resold either hold or increase in value making the initial outlay worthwhile to the buyer in both practically and economically.

The people who purchase his saddles tend to be anyone from professionals, like doctors who enjoy going campdrafting at the weekend to property owners or recreational riders.

"There's been no Russell Crowes or the like yet though," he laughs.

One of the highlights of his career however, was during the bicentenary when he collaborated with coach builder Jim Frecklington and other craftsmen on the Queen's coach. A huge feather in Dubbo's cap, the coach was built here with John making the mud flaps and straps, alongside Ross Wallace.

"It was amazing – big solid gold buckles which were wrapped in bandages so

we wouldn't scratch them," he recalls, "I also made some straps for the most recent coach which it's rumoured will be used for the upcoming royal wedding for Prince William. It's not every day you get to be involved in something like that."

CLEARLY passionate about his work, John has no plans to stop or change career direction anytime soon. Working on and moulding leather over the years has taken its toll on him physically, though.

"The only way I'll stop is if my eyes or my hands give up," he says, holding out rough hands that are clearly more worn and arthritic than they should be for a man of his age. He also has "fading eyesight" due to years of attending to the fine detail needed in the stitching and



John as a child on the property where he would later discover the art of saddle making.

flourishes on the leather.

With no plans to take on apprentice at the moment due to a constant stream of work, John would one day love to train someone and pass on his skills. He won't be giving them away, however.

"It's taken me years and lots of unpaid time to refine my skills. I'd love to train someone but I won't just tell them how to do it," he explains. "To get good you have to put in the time and learn why things work and why things don't, that's how you learn." ■