

 <p>Leon Liversage <i>Trail Rider</i> TRAIL RIDER <i>Saddles</i></p>		<p>THE SKILL OF HAND MADE SADDLES</p>
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THE STORY OF THE LIVERSAGE DYNASTY

Leon was born in Cullinan, the diamond mining town north east of Johannesburg, on a cold winter's day on 12th June 1956, to parents Lina and Sampie Liversage. He was the fifth of six children. Sampie was employed as the hoist driver at the Premier diamond mine then operated by De Beers. Lina was kept busy at home.

Primary School was at Cullinan, a small school servicing the mine worker's families. Leon led a normal life for the time, riding horses (bareback, interesting given his future career path and the development of the Haboob), drug free and managed to stay out of trouble and get a pass to secondary school.

Secondary school was at Bronkhorstspuit, 30km from Cullinan, which was the closest State school. This school was a larger institution and Leon again managed to complete his education without mishap. He played rugby, captained the second team, was a javelin thrower and short distance athlete.

While he was busy growing up and doing other people's bidding, Leon was never far from a horse or saddle. He made his first saddle in 1970 when he was still a school boy.

Upon leaving school he joined the prison service for 2 years (not in stripes) and played provincial rugby. The main lesson learned from this experience was to stay out of that institution.

Leaving the prison service, he joined Premier Mines (De Beers) as a learner official (researcher for the mine to improve production) for a year.

Then he moved countries to Kavango (Namibia) as transport manager for the Kavango Government Transport Service.

His career then took an auspicious turn when he moved to the eastern Caprivi where he worked for Caprivi Big Game Safaris eventually starting his own business in Katima Molilo (in the eastern Caprivi) doing transport and leather work.

By this time (1982), Leon was approaching the age of 26 years.

Moving back to RSA he took a position with Silverton Tanneries in Pretoria where he learned about the tanning process and of course the intricacies of leather. There he married Retha and started a family with the arrival of Lilanie and Kylon.

The call of the horses was strong and at the age of 29 years he and family moved to the Lowveld (Kaapmuiden) where he started doing horse-back safaris and continued saddle making more or less full time. His main saddle was the Trail Rider using a fibre glass tree with braiding but while the modern Trail Rider looks the same, there are several significant differences. There he met Mariaan, a keen horse woman, and the family enlarged with the arrival of Lindy.

After 5 years, the family moved to White River and close to schools for the children. Here Leon continued to make saddles and provided horse activities for the tourist operators in the Lowveld. It was during this time Leon applied and was awarded patents on the Trail Rider

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design and over time was awarded further patents for the shape and configuration of various saddle trees.

At 40 (1996) Leon and family moved to a location near Belfast to operate a lodge for SAFCOL (South African Forest Company Limited) because of his experience with safaris and tourism. Arriving he discovered that there was indeed no lodge so he built one.

Two years later he moved into Belfast to design and manufacture saddles full time devoting his life to the comfort of horses.

Leon's main stay was still the Trail Rider but he began designing other saddles for both trail riding and endurance. Around 2000 he designed and made the Bushwacker which was a very successful saddle and remains so. This was followed by other trail riding saddles like the Hacker designed for the larger rider.

The relationship with endurance riding was to become stronger with Mariaan starting her endurance riding career in which she excelled becoming a successful international rider with Leon providing support in breeding and training horses. Leon's family home was the location of the saddle making business until 2003 when he moved the fabrication to the current location in Belfast.

In those days the trees were heavier than they are now as Leon was always concerned about safety and, until he could absolutely prove each design was strong and durable, nothing was changed. Each design was tested by the family in training and then in competition until everyone was satisfied it met the stringent criteria for the saddle's application. Since that time, the saddles have evolved balancing the two objectives of optimising the weight and the weight distribution of a saddle without materially affecting the strength required for a safe saddle.

Leon's first endurance saddle was the Enduro where he, for the first time (1998), was able to make a saddle that gave the horse free shoulder movement while providing maximum weight distribution. At that time, there were several design parameters that were not in common use and/or well understood. These included: (a) the use of lighter leathers as the historical use of veg leather was perceived as being more durable; (b) the fit of a saddle properly to a horse's wither being an essential design parameter for a saddle and particularly a saddle used for long distance riding; (c) the middle of the saddle being the deepest part of the saddle therefore placing the rider further forward than had historically been the case. The tree for the Enduro saddle was based on a back mould of an endurance horse owned by a national rider who was having trouble with the GP saddle fit. However, while the Enduro was a significant advance, this still was not the outcome Leon required for a truly balanced riding position. Through riding and talking to riders, eventually the correlation between (a) the ball and heel of the foot and (b) the stirrup hanger and the deepest part of the saddle (tree) was achieved to get the optimum balanced riding position. Despite doing all of this, Leon could still see he was behind the stride. He achieved the result he wanted by sliding the top mould over the bottom mould onto the sweet spot similar to where a rider would sit bareback.

Leon then continued and made back moulds of different horses and, whenever he fitted a saddle, started recording wither measurements. At the veterinary faculty at Onderstepoort in Pretoria, he put a horse on treadmill and there he saw that the horse's back behind the wither while trotting was stationery vertically. Behind that area he could see there was a lot of

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muscle movement and from these tests he established that if the tree is too long, the longissimus dorsi muscle picks up the saddle and pushes it onto the scapula. Based on these findings, he decided to shorten the saddle tree and cut the front of the saddle towards the back to free up the shoulder. This of course meant that the weight distribution with just the tree was going away from the desired maximum weight distribution. It was then that Leon added an extended panel under the saddle to achieve the two objectives. This development while simple to state, was very complex to achieve. The other significant design parameter was the move away from convex panels which were and are still used by most saddlers.

In 2002 Leon started inserting the rigging straps into the fibre glass tree instead of attaching them with metal fittings. This was a major advance but by this time Leon was becoming more confident of the strength of the fibre glass construction which had been tested by some the best and largest competitors in the endurance riding scene. The modification was applied to both the trail riding saddles and the endurance riding saddles.

Kylon returned home after a period overseas where among other activities he worked in a saddlery in Germany. From this (2002) time father and son worked in the factory until 2012 when Leon started spending more time in the Kalahari designing and testing saddles.


Leon made several versions of the Enduro trying different ideas for the length of the saddle and the rigging finally settling on what you see today (which will probably only have a relatively short life span). In 2008, he made the Sport Light which is a shorter saddle and gives the rider one balanced position to ride in. The Kentucky was made for the endurance world championships held in Kentucky in 2010. This latter saddle in both a long and short design has proved extremely popular in the USA.

The generation of Haboobs had their origin in 2014 from Leon's musing in the Kalahari based on the desire to give the rider a softer seat when walking and also to provide a better fit (narrower) to the very fit horses. Leon widened the bars of the tree under the rider's seat bones such that when walking the rider sits on a soft leather seat just like riding bare back but when trotting or cantering the weight is taken up by the tree. The fibre glass Haboob was first sold in 2014 and proved very popular.

By 2014, the fibre glass construction had been proven. In the ongoing quest for improving saddles, Kylon started experimenting with carbon fibre. While the application of such material would seem to be a simple switch, it proved more difficult to get right. The development produced the carbon fibre Haboob in 2014 with these saddles going to market 2015. From this development, Leon then designed the Haboob Racer in several versions based on feedback from riders. He combined a trail riding saddle called the McLeon (developed in 2014) which was used for the base of the tree with the back modelled on the Dubai Racer. The Dubai Racer was developed in 2004 as a new design following a request from Sheik Mohammed in Dubai.

The Ausy Enduro and Ausy Trail Rider were designed in 2014 to build a comfortable saddle cut back at the shoulder with a deep seat and some protection at the front to present a new item to the Australian market.

The factory now makes 5 Trail Riding and 7 Endurance saddles as standard factory items. Every saddle is handmade. Many more designs are made for special orders. Wide fitting saddles are made for the Enduro and Trail Rider (including the Legend) saddles. However, a

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visit to the factory will show any observer that there could be a tree design for nearly any horse and if not Leon may be able to modify an existing design to suit.

Leon and Kylon are continuing to push the boundaries of hand-made saddle designs and doubtless there will be further improvements in the future.

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