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Staff photo by E.J. Harris

French saddle maker Pedro Pedrini will be teaching his leather-working skills at the Hamley's new saddle academy in Pendleton.

# An immigrant story

## French saddlemaker to teach at Hamley's academy

By KATHY ANEY  
East Oregonian

Pedro Pedrini knew he was born to make saddles. It just took a while to convince everyone else.

Pedrini powered through, over and around some major barriers on his way to becoming one of the world's elite saddlemakers. The easygoing Frenchman with a horseshoe mustache recently moved to Pendleton to instruct at Hamley's new saddle academy. Earlier this week, he agreed to sit down and chat about his ascension from dreamer to master saddlemaker. Surrounded by the tools of his trade and the aroma of leather at the Hamley saddle shop, he let his stories roll in a soft French accent.

Pedrini said he discovered horses as a 10-year-old after one of his father's friends started a dude ranch nearby at the base of the Alps in eastern France. The boy hung out with horses, became enamored with the cowboy life and learned about saddles, bridles, stirrups and the other tack. He considered working with horses for a career until his father objected.

"He didn't want me to do that, so I went to school to be a machinist," Pedrini said.

After graduation, Pedrini worked in a machine shop until sidelined by a forklift accident in 1971. Soon after, the 20-year-old had a eureka moment that changed everything. As he walked down a sidewalk in Geneva, Switzerland, he stared through the window of a gun shop at a beautiful leather holster.

"I fell in love when I saw that holster," Pedrini recalled. "The light came on."

He walked inside and asked who had made the holster and got the address of the leather artist whose shop was close by.

"I walked straight there," Pedrini said. "The leather carver, Carlo Candolfi, had red hair and a big beard and he invited me in."

He asked Candolfi to teach him the trade and the artist agreed. Over the next weeks and months, Pedrini learned to carve leather.

Eventually, with the idea of making western saddles, he decided to look across the pond for a chance to learn the craft. Pedrini knew he couldn't major in saddle making at a college or trade school. That's just not how it worked — those programs didn't exist.

"There were no formal saddle making schools. There were no degrees," Pedrini said. "There were just a bunch of guys here and there who've been doing it for a while who agreed to teach others."

He mailed letters written by an English-speaking friend to 10 American saddle shops, asking if he could apprentice. Only three replied and they all said no. One return letter was from David Hamley, one of the owners of Hamley's in Pendleton, who wrote that the shop couldn't take him at the time.



This Pedro Pedrini saddle, crafted for the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association event in 2013, sold for \$76,000.  
Contributed photo

In 1978, Pedrini decided to go to the United States anyway. Armed with a letter in English explaining what he wanted, he began visiting saddle shops. Texas saddle maker Eddie Brooks of the J.M. Capriola shop in Elko, Nevada, finally took him on. With Brooks, Pedrini learned both saddle making and Texas English.

Relationships with other saddlemakers followed as he bounced around the U.S., Canada and France. During one lean stretch, he and another aspiring saddlemaker slept in a pickup truck as they searched for jobs in Canada. From dozens of saddlemakers, Pedrini soaked in ideas on technique and design. He settled in Northern California in 1990, bought horses and started his own shop. He became an American citizen in 1992. Slowly, his work started garnering attention and winning awards such as the coveted Saddlemaker of the Year award at the Academy of Western Artists in 2008. In

2009, he launched a saddle school called the Western Leather Academy in California. Pedrini's saddles run from simple to wildly intricate. One saddle sold for \$76,000 — it featured \$40,000 in silver.

His passion for saddle making didn't consume every moment. Pedrini became a husband and father. He still plays his collection of acoustic and electric guitars, left over from his days playing in a rock band in France.

Recently, Pedrini sold his horses and left California to come to Hamley's. He never lost the desire to work for the iconic saddle shop, which is in its 113th year at its current location. The Hamley mark started 175 years ago after young harness and saddlemaker William Hamley emigrated from Cornwall, England. The shop has built saddles for a long list of world champion cowboys and celebrities such as Gene Autry and Matt Damon and Buffalo Bill. Pedrini still has the rejection letter he got



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

A Western concho adorns the side of one of Pedro Pedrini's saddles. Pedrini learned Western saddle making from saddle maker Eddie Brooks of the J.M. Capriola shop in Elko, Nevada.

from David Hamley in 1977.

"Forty years later, here I am anyway," he said, flashing a grin.

Owner Parley Pearce is ecstatic Pedrini finally made it to Pendleton. He said Pedrini fits into Hamley's tradition of training and developing young saddlemakers.

"I am thrilled to have Pedro here," Pearce said. "I consider him to be one of the finest craftsmen of his kind in the world today."

Pedrini will teach in an upstairs room that has workspace for six saddlemakers at one time. The academy offers 10-week courses where each student builds two saddles and shorter three-week sessions with the goal of building one saddle. Classes begin in the spring, though the start date is yet to be determined. Pedrini will customize his instruction to each student's experience, which he expects to vary.

"Some will come having never touched a knife or a piece of leather. Others will just want to carve and improve their skill," he said. "The idea is to help people achieve what they want to achieve."

Pedrini still has plenty of passion for his chosen profession. Every day, he said, he studies and learns something new. With each saddle, he sets his sights a little bit higher.

"The best saddle I ever made?" he said. "That's the next one."

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