

# Bum Wraps

How to find the dressage breeches that are right for you

BY MARGARET FREEMAN



**THEY WEAR THE PANTS:** *The right breeches may not ensure a spot on the podium (here, at WEG 2010), but they can help you feel, look, and ride better*

**B**reeches are an important piece of riding equipment. In dressage, the right pair enhances our ability to maintain a stable position in the saddle. But with prices for some high-end garments ranging as high as a used saddle, dressage breeches are also an investment. We want to ride well, but we also want to look our best while doing so without busting the budget.

*USDF Connection* talked to tack shops and catalog companies from coast to coast and also polled dressage riders to gain insight into what breech features work best for riders of every figure type and fashion taste.

For starters, we quickly learned that riding-wear trends don't reach to every corner of the country and often can be regional, with people tending to buy what they see on other riders in their own area. But riders also have decided opinions as to what works best for their own figure types and comfort levels.

"Put ten people in a room and they will like ten different breeches," says Gina Rose of Dressage Extensions, a dressage specialty store in Moorpark, CA, and a popular catalog and online retailer.

Some trends take a firm hold in the East or quickly come and go in California, and vice versa.

"Trends start at the outside [the coasts] and work their way in," says Maria Trout of SmartPak, the Plymouth, MA,-based online and catalog equine-supply company. Jordan Wong, of the dressage-centric tack shop and online retailer The Horse of Course, Claremore, OK, agrees, saying that riders in the middle of the county are more conservative, catching on to trends well after those on either coast.

## Fabrics

The dominant material in breeches today is microfiber, which is a relatively new fabric technology that first saw widespread use for athletic apparel in the 1990s. Microfiber is also popular because it "tends to camouflage undesirable figure areas," says Liz Russell of the Massachusetts-based tack-shop chain and online equestrian retailer Dover Saddlery.

Microfiber is an ultrathin filament, made of polyester and polyamide, including nylon, that is then woven into yarns of various sizes, shapes, and combinations to achieve specific characteristics, including softness, durability, absorption, wicking, and water repellency—all of which are sought-after qualities in breeches. (Microfiber is also used to create the leather-like material used in knee patches and full seats, which we'll discuss in a minute.)

Cotton and cotton blends, which once were the leading fabrics for breeches, are now seen more in lower-end choices, although some riders still prefer cotton in warm

temperatures. You can almost track the history of breech fabric over the last two decades by how much poly fiber was gradually added to cotton as poly gained acceptance to enhance sleekness and durability. "All cotton" is now a misnomer: You pretty much can't find cotton in breeches without at least 5 percent Lycra added for stretch.

Blended with cotton, bamboo made a big splash a couple of years ago because it was touted as eco-friendly. Although it can still be found in some lower-end breeches, bamboo hasn't really caught on in the equestrian world.

One of the advantages of microfiber over cotton is that microfiber retains its shape even after being stretched, while cotton tends to bag and wrinkle. Microfiber is also a snap to wash—no fretting about shrinkage. And it's easy to incorporate four-way stretch into microfiber (look for four-way stretch over two-way to increase durability and comfort). The newest thing in microfiber fabrics is stain resistance. The high-end German riding-apparel manufacturer Pikeur, for one, is using a finishing treatment for athletic wear called Barrier by HeiQ.

One of the frustrating things about reading catalog descriptions and clothing labels is that many brands invent their own fabric terminologies, which are largely meaningless to the consumer. If the name of a fabric or full-seat material is capitalized or has a trademark symbol, you may be able to look up the material online to learn its specific qualities. For example, Schoeller is a reliable European brand of fabric found in athletic gear and often used in high-end breeches.

Fabric weight is also a consideration, and not just because of the weather. Our legs don't sweat as much as our torsos, so the weight of breech fabric is less of an issue than that used in shirts and jackets. In breeches, a heavier fabric can have a compression effect—useful for smoothing out bumps as well as for stabilizing the seat in the saddle. (Although many riders like to invest in winter-weight breeches and riding tights for cold weather, lightweight fabrics can still work for winter when layered over long silk or ski underwear.)

One advantage to heavier fabrics is that you don't have to be as concerned with what you wear underneath, especially white breeches at a show. (Don't even think about buying summer-weight breeches in white!) Be aware, however, that light-colored breeches that get wet, whether from rain or sweat, will become somewhat see-through, no matter how thick they are.

## Full Seats: The Dressage Hallmark

Although you can wear any style of breeches in the dressage arena, to many, the full seat is the quintessential dressage choice. Unlike hunter/jumper riders, who tend to prefer



FULL SEAT: *For many, the only choice for dressage*

breeches with knee patches (reinforcements on the insides of the knees to add grip and help prevent chafing), many dressage riders like full seats, in which the entire backside and inner-leg area is covered for maximum “stick.”

When full-seat breeches first became popular, the only available seat material was leather. Unfortunately, leather is expensive and can be difficult to care for, often becoming stiff as a board when washed in conventional laundry detergents—which were needed in order to get the fabric clean.

Enter Clarino, followed by McCrown, both of which are trademarked microfiber synthetic leathers that combine the washability of fabric with the grippiness of leather. When Clarino was introduced, some thought that this “faux leather” was of lesser quality, especially because it was often found in lower-priced breeches. In fact, Clarino and many similar products are durable materials that will likely outlast the

breeches themselves, and it can actually be more expensive to produce than the real thing. The reason that breeches with Clarino tend to cost less is that it comes in perfect widths, without the waste involved in cutting leather hides.

Because it’s essentially a fabric, Clarino and other synthetic leathers “breathe,” wash well, and hold dye, unlike leather. It’s also cooler to wear. If there’s any disadvantage to Clarino over leather, it’s that Clarino drapes like fabric, while leather surrounds the body like the skin that it is. Clarino has a little less friction with a saddle but also less friction with your own skin. (If the breech fabric is loose while the full seat sticks to the saddle, you’ll get rubbing on your bottom, regardless of the material.)

Leather full seats are still very much around, but today’s models are usually deerskin, which is softer than other leathers and doesn’t stiffen after washing. If you turned away from leather in the past because of its stiffness but miss its other good qualities, you might want to give deerskin a try.

One of the latest trends in full-seats is a “segmented” design, with separate patches over the seat bones and legs to give more freedom of movement in the crotch area. Some people don’t care for the look of the segmented full-seats, but that’s seen on the ground, not with the rider in the saddle. A segmented seat is less noticeable if the seat material is the same color as the fabric.

Finally, for those who wish there were a happy medium between full-seat and knee-patch breeches, some manufacturers offer elongated-patch or “dressage patch” designs, in which the seat material extends from the knee to below the crotch area but doesn’t cover the crotch or backside.

## Size and Cut

The most important factor in determining satisfaction with a pair of breeches is the fit. Unfortunately, there’s no consistency in sizing among brands. One maker’s 30 might be another’s 32 or even 34. (With the exception of some pull-ons, which are usually sized S-M-L-XL, breeches use waist sizes, not dress sizes.)

Even more critical than the waist dimension in assessing fit is the rise, which is the distance between the waist and the crotch. Some breech manufacturers produce a range of high-, mid-, and low-rise styles, while others’ offerings are consistently either low- or high-rise, regardless of what the description in the catalog says.

Particularly when it comes to low- and high-rise breeches, riders tend to have strong opinions. One might complain that a high-rise cut brings the waistband up to her armpits, while another might feel that a low-rise pounds her kidneys, leaves an ugly gap in the back, or produces the dreaded

## Which Rise Is Right for You?

**H**ere's a general guideline for selecting the right rise for your body type in zip-front breeches, as suggested by Dressage Extensions' Gina Rose:

A woman with a boyish figure and straight hips should prefer low-rise, which hits below the navel.

A woman who wants back support or has a particularly curvy figure will likely choose high-rise, which hits above the navel. High-rise is also often the preferred look with shadbelly coats because the waistband is covered by the coat for a clean look.

The majority of women will do fine with a mid-rise that ends at or just below the navel. Kerrits has attached the term "flow rise" to its breeches that are lower in front but have full coverage in back, and that term is finding its way into general use.

"muffin top" effect. The only way to figure out which cut you prefer is to try them on. If you find a brand that fits you well in the rise, waist, and leg, it's likely that the fit will be consistent across other models of that brand as well.

Women over 40 generally prefer a higher rise if it works with their body type (see "Which Rise Is Right for You?" above), while many teens and young women won't consider anything that covers the belly button. Pull-on styles tend to appeal to slender women, especially those who might have a bit of a tummy. Some fuller-figured women, especially those with skinny legs, also prefer pull-ons because the stretchy material conforms to their contours and doesn't bag through the legs.

Thigh length also affects breech fit. Someone with a long thigh may be happier with breeches in Long/Tall rather than Regular, regardless of her height. That's because, if there's not enough material in the leg, bending your knee will pull the seat down, especially if the rise is skimpy. So if, say, a 30R isn't quite roomy enough, try both a 30L and a 32R.

### Features and Colors

Styles come and go, as do colors. Do you want a wide or a narrow waistband? Belt loops or none? Front or side zip? (Some think the smooth line of a side zip looks better with a shadbelly.) Plain front or pleats? Pants-style pockets, single zip pocket, or none? Calf panel, gripper elastic, or hook-and-loop leg closure? Front compression panel for tummy control? These and other variants, as with all fashion trends, tend to go in and out of style.

The latest looks include "boot length" breeches for



*ALL THE RAGE: The denim trend shows no signs of abating. This model features contrast stitching, back pockets, and a contrasting-color full seat.*

schooling, which are worn with paddock boots but not half-chaps. Contrast stitching and metallic adornments are also on order this fall, as are continuing trends in contrasting colors for full-seats. Plaids fluctuate in popularity, and piping has pretty much come and gone. The current hot "color" for schooling, denim, is likely to get hotter. We're seeing the blue-jeans look—including rivets, front and back pockets, and decorative stitching—at all price points, including the most expensive.

### Shopping for Breeches

The best way to find breeches is to try on them on, a process that can be as much fun as shopping for a swimsuit. Most tack shops, however, don't carry a full line of dressage

## Shopper's Delight

There's more than one reason that dressage enthusiasts make the pilgrimage to Dressage at Devon (PA) every year. Some come to this and other major competitions primarily for the shopping.

Equine expos and shows and events with trade fairs (such as the upcoming Adequan/USDF National Symposium) feature a selection of dressage tack and apparel, right there for comparison shopping and trying on. Particularly if you don't live in an area blessed with a dressage-centric tack shop, a trip to one of these events can be worthwhile. You may find some great bargains, too.

breeches in different makes and price points, the exception being those large bricks-and-mortar dressage specialty retailers. That's why many shoppers turn to dressage catalogs and websites, which offer a wider variety of features, prices, and sizes.

You can't try before you buy online or over the phone, of course, and you may have to pay both to have the products shipped to you and to return them when they don't fit. On the plus side, many websites allow customers to review

products, and you can glean valuable information and sizing suggestions from people who've already tried the breeches you're thinking of buying.

The retailers themselves are well aware that a brief description and a tiny photo can't answer all of your questions about fit and materials. Most employ well-versed phone reps who can provide details and suggest sizes based on customer feedback. They may ask you several questions to narrow your choices:

1. Price range
2. Body type, including rise. Tell the rep what kind of street-wear pants works best for you.
3. Riding background (just getting started? Experienced?) and intended use (schooling, clinics, show)
4. Desired features, such as pull-on or zip front.

Know the retailer's return policy. The catalog reps usually expect—and will even suggest—that you order two or three pairs in a range of sizes to try on, keep the one that fits best, and return the others in good condition with all labels intact.

The best way to get a bargain in new breeches is to watch for closeouts, which usually are last year's colors that have been discontinued. Tack and apparel vendors at some larger

## Men and Kids Need Breeches, Too!

Reflecting the dressage world's demographics, the predominant market for breeches in this county is women. Aside from the statistics, one reason there aren't many choices for men is that a man is more likely to wear a pair of breeches until it disintegrates before he goes shopping again.

Most male dressage riders want their breeches to be sufficiently long in the leg and roomy through the crotch. They probably aren't looking for colors beyond the most basic choices. If the waist is right but the rest of the fit isn't perfect, try a Long/Tall before going up a size. Seek out retailers that specialize in dressage wear, as general English-type tack shops are unlikely to carry full-seats for men.

As for children, besides the issue of growth spurts, breeches hang on them differently than on adults because kids don't have hips. Make sure the waist of zip-front breeches has a good set of belt loops, because they will need the belt. Jodhpurs and paddock boots, traditionally considered more appropriate for young children than breeches and tall boots, are permitted in national-level dressage competition.

Slip-ons are popular with kids, especially for schooling. Younger teens can often wear the smaller sizes of adult breeches, with women's breeches starting around size 24 and men's around 32.



TRADITIONAL: Men who ride dressage tend to prefer classic cuts and colors over trendy looks

dressage shows carry closeouts—it's like outlet shopping for riding clothes—so even if you aren't planning to ride at a show, it could be worth a visit to bargain-hunt.

Dressage breeches range in price from around \$50 to well over \$400. For the most part, you get what you pay for, as the more expensive breeches tend to feature higher-quality materials and engineering that translate into better fit and many years of wear. Breeches in the \$50 to \$150 range can still be good buys, however, and should last a good couple of years instead of a decade. Decide your budget and then look for the best possible fit.

## Care

The biggest dilemma in caring for breeches is when easy-care fabrics are sewn to high-maintenance leather. In order to keep the leather soft, the breeches must be washed with a specialized leather-care laundry product, such as Pepede, Vel-Ve-Ton, or Leather Therapy. But these products won't necessarily pull dirt or remove stains from the fabric itself—a particular problem for white show breeches.

Here's what veteran competitors suggest for white or light-colored leather full-seats: Keep a stain stick in your barn and show kits, and apply it to stains immediately. Wash

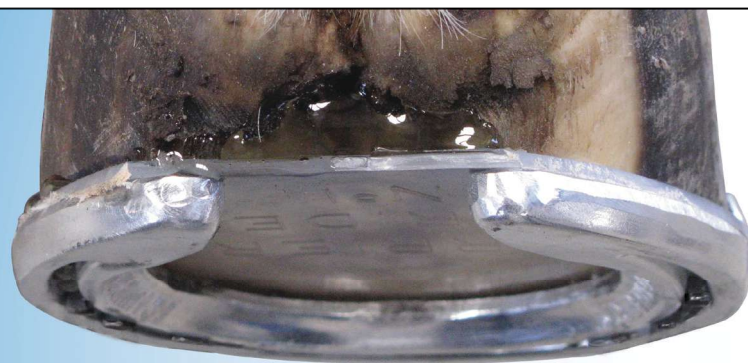
the breeches as soon as possible, and run them through the wash cycle more than once if necessary. Stretch and reshape the leather while it is still damp, and line-dry out of the sun and away from any heat source. The stain most likely to cause permanent damage is when your black saddle gets wet from rain and the dye leaches onto your breeches, and you may want to designate a pair of permanently dingy white breeches your rainy-day show attire for just that reason.

Washing breeches with a synthetic seat is much easier. Follow the directions on the care tag, but usually this means standard detergent, cool wash, and line dry.

A specialized line of products for athletic fabrics called Hey Sport is particularly useful for washing microfiber products to retain breathability and even water and stain repellency. There's even one for washing microfiber/leather combos.

Happy shopping and riding! ▲

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