



These BOOTS Are Made for RIDING

A buyer's guide to fit, function, and fashion

BY MARGARET FREEMAN

CHOICES, CHOICES: *If you can dream it, you can probably get it*



With dressage coats becoming more fashion-forward over the last few years, tall dressage boots are marching right along with them.

The catalogs are still mostly filled with smooth-leather black boots, but colored leather is now fairly common for training wear and even occasionally at shows. If you are willing to spring for custom, you can get pretty much any color you want, with interesting detailing as well. Patterned leathers—ridges, swirls, or even crocodile—are also cropping up. For further interest, custom boots offer cuffs at the top of the boots in contrasting colors and patterns.

But selecting a pair of riding boots is about much more than fashion. A well-fitted boot protects a rider's feet and legs and can even enhance her leg position. Popular options, such as zippers and elastic gussets, ease the task of getting into and out of snug-fitting boots. In this article, we'll explain how to find the best fit, cut, and options for your needs—and then we'll delve into the latest fashion trends, in and out of the show arena.

What's a Dressage Boot, Anyway?

Most tall riding boots seen in dressage competition are what's known as dress boots—boots without laces. Tall boots that lace across the instep are called field boots, so named because they were originally used in fox hunting at informal meets.

Away from the hunt field, field boots are more common in the hunter and jumper rings, although they are often seen in lower-level dressage and are permitted at all levels. (See "Boot Rules" below for more on what's allowed in competition.)

Some catalogs and manufacturers make a further distinction between a "dress boot" and a "dressage boot." "Dressage boot" usually indicates more rigid leather, with the boot shaft set on the foot at a slight forward angle because the ankle is less flexible.

Dress boots used to have round tops, but preference for a Spanish top (outside higher than inside) has evolved. There can be a difference of up to 7 cm (almost 3 inches) between inside and outside. The Spanish top is popular because it makes the rider's leg appear longer.

Boot Rules

For schooling, you can wear any kind of footwear you want—but always choose boots or shoes with heels for safety reasons.

If you plan to compete at a dressage show that operates under US Equestrian Federation rules (this includes many

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ALWAYS CORRECT: *The traditional black boot is allowed in all dressage competition. Olympian Guenter Seidel is wearing dress boots (boots without laces) with Spanish tops that extend above the outsides of the knees.*

schooling shows), then you need to know the USEF dressage rules regarding attire.

Tall boots or jodhpur boots (paddock boots) are required for tests through Fourth Level. (Jodhpur boots and jodhpurs are usually seen on younger children, although riders of any age may wear them.) Color is not specified. Half-chaps (leggings) in solid black or brown are allowed

I Hate My New Boots! Now What?

Before you place an order, make sure you understand the seller's return policy—and whether returns are allowed at all. For example, you may be able to return boots in a limited amount of time if you've only worn them inside your home on a carpeted floor, but not if you've ridden in them. Find out whether the seller will take back a stock boot or even custom-ordered boots.

If you decide to keep the boots (or you're stuck with them) but they don't break in to your satisfaction, know that some tack shops have resources to make fit adjustments. Failing that, find out if there is a tack shop or a shoe-repair shop in your area that can insert or repair zippers, add elastic inserts, cut down the back of the knee, and stretch boots.

through First Level if they match the color of the paddock boots, are made of smooth leather or leather-like material, and don't have fringe. **Note:** Black boots are required for tests above Fourth Level at USEF-licensed/USDF-recognized shows.

At FEI-recognized shows (CDIs), boots must be either black or the same color as the riding coat.

Shopping Options

Boot shopping can rank right up there in frustration level with the search for saddles and breeches. If local choices are limited, you need to either travel or take a chance with mail order. If the boots you order aren't quite right, you might be stuck with boots that are uncomfortable or that you can't wear at all.

That's why, whether you're looking for fashion options or just trying to find boots that fit, we advise first tapping local resources. The ideal is a nearby tack shop that stocks a wide selection of boot sizes so that you can try them on right there. That's a big advantage because "You don't always fit into what you measure," according to Beth Haist, owner of The Horse of Course tack shop in Claremore OK, whose mobile unit travels to Florida and to major shows in the East.

The reason: Working with a natural material like leather can result in variations, as you undoubtedly know from trying on leather shoes. In boots, which have not only shoe sizes but calf widths and heights, the variables are multiplied. The time of day and the temperature and humidity levels at the time that you are measured can affect your "size" and result in a different fit when your boots finally arrive. If it takes a couple months for the boots to arrive and you've lost or gained several pounds in the meantime, that's also a factor.

Next best would be a tack shop that employs a boot-measuring specialist who can order what you want. Such retailers often represent specific manufacturers. Be aware that your "custom" order may not be bespoke in the true sense: In many cases, what you get is a ready-made boot pulled from a wider stock of measurements than the shop itself can carry.

If a ready-made boot doesn't suit your measurements, or if you are seeking custom detailing, you may need to delay your boot shopping until you can visit a boot haven like the Wellington, FL, area or a major dressage show that attracts a variety of boot vendors, such as Dressage at Devon (PA).

If local resources aren't available and a visit to a boot Mecca isn't in the cards, then you'll need to resort to ordering boots online or from a catalog. Be aware that there is little

consistency in sizing among brands, and each maker has its own size chart. Follow our fitting protocol (see “Measuring Guide” below), and study the charts carefully before you order.

Measuring Guide

Here’s how to measure for riding boots, based on information from several boot makers. You’ll need the following:

- Chair
- Friend
- Flexible measuring tape
- Your regular breeches and socks.

If your calves tend to swell in the heat or at certain times or circumstances—say, in the late afternoon or after you’ve been sitting for a while—that’s when you’ll want to measure.

Wearing your regular socks and breeches but without shoes on, sit in a chair with your legs bent at a 90-degree angle. Have your friend measure the circumference of both calves at the widest part. Then measure the leg length from the floor to the crease at the back of the knee. Check to see whether the fitting chart uses inches or centimeters, and note measurements accordingly. Most measuring tapes list inches on one side and centimeters on the other.

Boot fitting charts usually show the height before the boot breaks in. Depending on the stiffness of the leather, the boot could drop between half an inch to as much as two inches at the ankle. Field boots will drop more than dress boots. If the boot is made of stiff, lined leather, it shouldn’t drop more than an inch.

Options

Start by deciding how stiff you want your boots to be. The argument for wearing tall boots instead of soft half-chaps, for example, starts with the assertion that boots encourage a quieter leg and more subtle leg aids. But it comes down to



FASHION-FORWARD: With today's custom boot options, you can get whatever you can dream up. A custom-boot vendor at Dressage at Devon (PA) offered (clockwise from top left) an array of colors and top/toe options (the blue boot at right is a field boot, with laces), patriotic tops, and a variety of styles in today's hot color: brown.

personal preference: Some dressage riders love very stiff riding boots, while others can’t stand them.

A boot’s stiffness depends on the type of leather used and whether the boot is lined. Traditional dressage riding boots have a “whalebone” stiffener in the shaft to minimize the amount of drop. That’s why many dressage boots with zippers have the zipper in the front rather than up the back.

Elastic gussets at the tops of the boots can relieve calf strain. Some boots have an elastic insert all the way up the back, so

precision fitting is not an issue. Some higher-end boots have a “window” of softer leather on the insides of the calves for those who want a less-rigid connection with the horse’s sides while retaining the stiffness of the boot shaft.

If you plan to purchase ready-made boots, you will need to determine whether the models you like have the options you require. Besides color and stiffness, available options may include type of leather, lining, ankle cut, sole material, gussets, spur rests, zipper placement, toe design, and spur inserts. If you’re ordering a true custom boot, of course, you can choose any options you want.

Fashion Trends

Traditional plain black leather still predominates at dressage shows. Boots, after all, are expensive and long-lasting, and most people aren’t going to make a hefty investment that might make their boot style obsolete.

If you like a bit of bling with your traditional look, patent-leather or subtle crystal inserts at the top are custom options for black boots that add interest while staying within traditional lines.

Want a color other than black for showing? First make



TRADITIONAL WITH A TWIST: Buyers can personalize their black boots with custom tops or toe caps or even with fancy leggings for wear with paddock boots (at right)

sure it's permitted at your level ("Boot Rules," page 41); then consider the rest of your kit. Start by matching the boots to your jacket. Then decide whether your breeches, stock tie, and saddle pad work well with them.

Cost

Ready-made dress boots from a catalog start around \$200, with many models costing \$500 and up. Dress boots at a tack shop will usually start around \$500 and go up from there depending on whether they need to be ordered.

Semi-custom boots start around \$750. Expect to pay around \$1,000 for full custom, with each option priced separately above that.

What's the difference between a low-end boot and a high-end boot? According to Maria Trout, director of marketing at the Massachusetts-based online retailer Smart-Pak, entry-level boots tend to be made of softer leather. You can find boots with elastic inserts along the zippers in both low- and mid-range models. Some mid-priced ready-made boots come in brown as well as the standard black.

The Agony of Da Feet: Breaking in New Boots

This is most riders' least favorite part of the boot-buying process. New boots can be so high that you can hardly bend your knee, and the unbroken-in ankles can rub mercilessly. Here are some tips and tricks for keeping the pain to a minimum.

Spray or wipe the inside of tight boots with a boot-stretch product before you put them on. You can also try water, but don't use too much because it will break down the fibers of the leather. Massage the ankle with leather conditioner.

To slide on the stiff new boots and avoid rubs, wear your thinnest breeches and socks and sprinkle your socks with baby powder. Plastic bags on your legs can also help. Use heel lifts until the ankle leather becomes more flexible. The Horse of Course's Beth Haist recommends wrapping your ankles with foam or bubble wrap until the boots break in. Compression socks and gel bands are also available to protect the leg. Wear your boots for fifteen minutes at a time, a couple times a day for maybe a week or so, before you ride in them.

Riding Boots and Your Health

Not every rider is a good candidate for tall boots, especially dress boots without zippers or gussets. Some people with circulation issues in their legs simply can't tolerate tall boots, at least for long periods of time, and are better off wearing paddock boots and half-chaps at home and boots with elastic inserts and zippers for showing.

Back problems can be exacerbated by boots with rigid ankles or by pulling on and removing boots without zippers, or when trying to walk (or even ride!) in new boots during the break-in period.

Riders with high insteps can't tolerate boots without zippers. If that's you, look for boots whose zippers go as low as possible and don't just stop at the top of the foot.

Boot Care

If possible, wear your boots only for riding and use other footwear for stable chores and hosing down your horse. If you can't remove your boots, you can pull rubbers over the feet to keep them clean and dry and to offer a touch of extra warmth in cold weather.

Clean your boots after each wearing, but don't just swipe them down with the same stuff you use on your tack. Remove dirt and sweat with a clean, damp sponge. Polish them once a week with a boot cream made specifically for footwear. If the boots are damp with sweat, dry them away from direct sun or a heat source. Insert boot trees (quality cedar trees absorb moisture and help to eliminate odors) and run up the zippers.

About those zippers: They require special care because dirt is the enemy and the single biggest reason they'll break at the least opportune moment. Never wipe the zippers with the same sponge used on the leather, as that will force grime down into the teeth. Wipe zippers with clean water or occasionally with a solvent, and run an old toothbrush over the teeth from time to time.

After your horse and your saddle, your riding boots may be your most significant dressage investment. Properly cared for, good boots should give years of service. ▲

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