

A full-page photograph of a woman, Susan Hoffman Peacock, riding a brown horse. She is wearing a dark navy blue riding jacket with gold buttons, white breeches with dark side stripes, black riding boots, and a black helmet. She is smiling and looking down at the horse. The horse is a chestnut or bay color and is wearing a black bridle. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a fence.

# *Less Bounce to the Ounce*

Sports bras for dressage riders

BY SUSAN HOFFMAN PEACOCK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHARONFIBELKORN.COM

FINISHED PRODUCT: *Good training and appropriate attire help writer Susan Hoffman Peacock feel and perform her best*



**R**iding—especially sitting the trot—is a high-impact activity, just like running. And with a USDF membership that’s currently 96 percent female, that means most dressage riders in this country are wearing (or should be wearing) sports bras under their schooling shirts or show coats.

Women know that quelling the bounce makes high-impact activities more comfortable. But many struggle to find a bra that fits correctly and does the job without chafing, digging in to sensitive skin, or causing other discomfort. And female riders may not realize that excessive bounce can actually affect their balance—and therefore their horses’.

We know we’ll do just about anything to ride better, so let’s look at how to find a sports bra that helps you feel and perform your best.

## Why You Need a Sports Bra

Proper support offers health benefits aside from the performance and aesthetic ones. According to the *University of California, Berkeley Wellness Letter*, “You may be surprised to know that researchers actually study breast motion. Breasts do more than bounce up and down. They also bounce from front to back and from side to side—and even in a figure-eight pattern. And the bigger the breasts, the more momentum they generate. One study found that DD-cup breasts move more than eight inches vertically during running.”

All that bouncing can cause the ligament that supports the breasts to stretch, causing sagging. It can also lead to stretch marks and chafing.

Do your shoulders ache after wearing a bra? If the bra offers inadequate support for your activity, the shoulder straps can dig in painfully. Especially for women with large breasts, long-term wear of unsupportive bras—especially if they overtighten the straps in an attempt to get more support—can create grooves or indentations in the trapezius muscles, which run from the tops of the shoulders up the sides of the neck. The indentations usually go away if the woman switches to a better bra, but they can become permanent if left untreated. In addition, shoulder grooves and neck pain (and possibly headaches, too) often go hand in hand as a result of stress on the trapezius, which is exacerbated by the weight of the breasts themselves.

Partly in an attempt not to draw attention to their chests, many larger-breasted women adopt a slumped posture with the neck and chin forward (which shows up as poor form in the saddle). The problem is, a large-breasted woman’s neck and back muscles are already working overtime to carry the extra weight. Correct posture (including strengthening the



**GOOD FIT:** *This compression-style sports bra fits well, with no gaps, squashing of flesh into the armpits, or “spillage.” The wide chest band and shoulder straps provide support.*

muscles of the upper back if necessary) plus a good sports bra will help reduce strain. Keep your head and neck erect and balanced over your shoulders.

## Sports Bras Defined

Unlike daily-wear bras, which are meant to offer minimal to modest support during everyday activities, sports bras are designed to stabilize breast movement during exercise. So-called low-impact bras might work for such activities as walking, yoga, or weight training. Medium-impact bras are suited to activities with more movement, such as cycling. And high-impact—hello, dressage!

Of course, it matters how much breast the bra is being asked to support. A medium-impact bra might offer high-impact support to a woman with an A-cup. Likewise, women with larger-than-average breasts need super-sized support. A large-breasted woman may need a high-support bra even for walking and other lower-impact activities.

## Basic Fit Tips

Whether it’s a sports bra or an everyday model, it must fit well. Here are some general guidelines.

The bra cups should comfortably house your breast tissue. If your cups runneth over, they’re too small. Neither should they squash the breasts sideways into the armpits—never a comfortable option, but of special concern for riders because we need to have our arms comfortably at our sides.

If the bra has an underwire for extra support, the wire should lie comfortably under your breasts without poking or pinching. ➔





**ENHANCED SUPPORT:** *This encapsulated-style sports bra features separate cups instead of compressing the breasts against the chest, a design that may offer better support*

Most of a bra's support comes from the band, not from the shoulder straps. The band should fit snugly below the shoulder blades. If the bra is an encapsulation model (with distinct cups instead of one solid piece across the chest), the center panel should lie flat against the breastbone.

Adjusted correctly, straps should stay put, neither falling off your shoulders nor digging in tightly.



**REAR VIEW:** *Sports bras with closures, like this model, may provide better support than "bra tops" because they don't have to be stretchy enough to pull on over the head. This design also features adjustable shoulder straps that widen over the tops of the shoulders for comfort and less digging in to the shoulder muscles.*

When you try on a bra, jump up and down, bend over, and jog (even if it's just in place in the dressing room) to test support, comfort, and stay-put-ness. If you're shopping online or from a catalog, ask about the merchant's return policy before you buy.

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## Sports-Bra Shopping

In addition to the above fit tips, sports-bra shoppers need to check the fit and functionality of these specialized garments. The keys to minimizing the bounce lie in the bra's design, fabric, and fit.

Although many sports bras are "compression" models that flatten the breasts against the chest, many experts suggest that encapsulated models (with or without underwire) actually do a better job of holding breasts in place. That's because it's easier to control two smaller masses than one large one.

Go for wide shoulder straps over narrow ones; wider straps are more supportive and comfortable, especially for riding and other high-impact sports.

"Bra top" models, which pull on over the head, are popular, comfortable, and great for your Pilates class—but not necessarily great for riding, especially if you're a full-figured gal. The stretch that enables you to get the bra on means that it may not offer enough support for high-impact activities. Better choices for riding are bras with back or front closures, whose fabric usually contains less stretch.

Many of today's sports bras combine supportive, moisture-wicking fabrics with just enough "give" for comfort and mobility. Moving moisture away from the skin is important

in preventing heat rashes and in helping you keep cool. Although a high-impact sports bra may not be as comfy as your old PJs, it shouldn't limit your movement or feel like a straitjacket.

Some large-breasted women resort to layering two or more sports bras in order to get the support they need. But before you pile on the bras, try a few models with the features I've described. Some retailers, such as Title Nine (titlenine.com), use a rating system indicating each bra's level of support, so you can narrow your focus appropriately.

## Don't Judge a Bra by Its Looks

The most common mistake women make when shopping for a sports bra is to base the purchase on appearance. Effective high-impact support bras have a utilitarian look. They're made from reinforced material that does not drape well, so they have clunky-looking seams.

In another aesthetic turnoff, the silhouette created by encapsulated-style sports bras recalls that of the cone-shaped bras of the 1950s—a look despised by many women, except maybe Lady Gaga and Madonna. However, once you put on a shirt, these bras tend to make the wearer's chest look more supported and lifted than a less-supportive bra. They are also less likely to squeeze your skin in unattractive places. ➔

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**PRETTY IS AS PRETTY DOES:** *This front-closure model ain't sexy, but its supportive materials and design combined with a good fit will help make this full-figured wearer feel confident in the saddle*

## Where to Buy

With riding and running generally considered the highest-impact sports, female equestrians are usually steered to-

ward sports bras designed for runners. Therefore, a place to start would be an athletic-wear retailer or specialty running store with lots of running apparel (and, ideally, knowledgeable female runners on staff).

Besides all-purpose sporting-goods stores, several catalog and online retailers offer large selections of sports bras: Road Runner Sports ([roadrunnersports.com](http://roadrunnersports.com)), See Jane Run ([seejanerun.com](http://seejanerun.com)), Her Room ([herroom.com](http://herroom.com)), and the aforementioned Title Nine are a few examples. Some bra manufacturers also sell directly from their websites.

Tack shops typically carry a limited selection of undergarments for riders. Catalog and online equestrian retailers may offer more choices, although usually not as extensive as those of the general-interest athletic retailers. However, you may find brands that you won't see in the athletic-wear stores.

No matter where you choose to shop, the key is to find a retailer who's knowledgeable about sports bras for high-impact sports and who can advise you about selection and fit. Even for daily wear, many women don't know how a bra should fit and wind up with an incorrect size or cut. To provide adequate support, a sports bra must fit correctly. If you shop online or from a catalog, look for knowledgeable customer-service representatives. Online reviews of items by previous purchasers are another source of information that

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Photo courtesy: Bob Langrish



can provide helpful insights as to sizing, cut, comfort, and support.

A quality sports bra can set you back anywhere from \$40 to \$100, but the money spent is a wise investment in your health and your riding. Plan on updating the contents of your lingerie drawer periodically: *Fitness* magazine advises replacing sports bras every three months to a year, depending on frequency of wear and intensity of workouts. Other sources suggest using 100 workouts as the replacement rule of thumb.

To help keep your bra in good shape, wash it according to the manufacturer's instructions.

## Your Horse Should Bounce, Not You

It's not a pleasant sight when a rider's chest bounce grabs more attention than her horse's movement. When it comes to riding, support might not be beautiful, but being supported is!

### Digital Edition Bonus Content



Read a Washington Post online sports-bra Q&A with a fitness editor and a sports-apparel researcher and designer.

The right bra is a necessity for every woman who rides. There are many options, so do your own research, try on lots of bras, and discover what works best for you. You'll look, feel, and ride better. ▲

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