

THE DRESSAGE RIDER'S HOW-TO GUIDE

Braids? Polo wraps? We've got you covered.

BY SHARON BIGGS



IMPECCABLE: Beautiful braids, correctly fitting tack and attire, and excellent grooming complement the bloom of health and present your horse to his best advantage. Steffen Peters presents Ravel at the 2012 Olympic Games veterinary inspection.

JENNIFER BRYANT

Every equestrian sport has a particular way of turning out horse and rider for competition, and dressage is no different. To call yourself a true DQ (that's "dressage queen" for the uninitiated), you need to master the big three: braiding, tail prep, and polo-wrap application (the latter of which will also come in handy should your horse's legs need to be bandaged). You also need to know how to select and adjust a saddle pad for a flattering look and maximum horse comfort.

In this article, a grooming expert and a tack-shop owner offer step-by-step instructions. Bonus: A dressage judge and longtime competitor and horse owner shares her pet peeves and advice on show turnout.

How to: Braid for Dressage

First, the rules. Although the US Equestrian Federation Rule Book states that braiding the horse's mane for dressage is optional, the unwritten rule is always to braid, except perhaps for unrecognized competitions (schooling shows). Most dressage riders consider braiding a traditional form of showing respect for the judge and the competition, as well as a way of enhancing the look of their horses' necks.

As you may know, braiding can be a tricky craft to conquer. For guidance we turned to Charni Lewis, trainer and instructor at Flintridge Riding Club in La Canada Flintridge, CA, and the author of *Braiding Manes and Tails: A Visual Guide to 30 Basic Braids* (Storey, 2008).

"Braiding styles have changed over the years," says Lewis. "Style is a personal preference, but for a long time there was a school of thought that said braids should extend up along the top of the horse's neck. But it's difficult to get that line even. The dressage bun [aka the button braid] is a popular style that lies close to the neck and give a nice, smooth topline. The other benefit to the bun is that all the hair is contained, and so the braid doesn't look fuzzy. They also tend to last really well and look fresh for a couple of days. Shavings are fairly easy to brush off."

What you'll need: Spray bottle, sponge, hair clip, pull-through, pulling comb, comb, braid aid, seam ripper, and yarn that matches your horse's mane.

Step 1: Prepare the mane by pulling it to about five to six inches in length. Shampoo the mane a few days before you plan to braid, but omit conditioner and any products that will make the hair slippery, such as "sheen" sprays.

Step 2: Cut the yarn into pieces of about ten to twelve inches in length. Thread the hank through your belt loop or through the ring in your horse's halter—somewhere that will be easy to reach while you braid. Dampen the mane with water or with a braiding product such as Quic Braid.



HUNTER BRAIDS: Can be tied so they lie flat against the neck or with little knobs at the top, as shown here



DRESSAGE BUNS: An extra wrap or fold creates the dressage bun or button braid, popular in our sport

Use a braid aid or comb to section off a clump of mane. If you're using a comb, mark a space on it with black tape so all braids are the same thickness, Lewis advises: an inch to an inch and a half apart for hunter braids, and up to two inches apart for dressage buns. Use a hair clip to hold the rest of the mane away from the section you'll be braiding.

Divide the mane into three equal sections and plait down from the crest, putting pressure on the braid in a downward motion. Avoid pulling the braid out and away from the crest, which will create a "Pippi Longstocking" look. Halfway down the braid, fold a piece of yarn in half, incorporate it into the braid, and continue plaiting. When you reach the end of the braid, pinch the end with one hand as you loop the yarn tightly around it and make a double knot. Repeat until the entire mane is braided down.

Step 3 (for traditional hunter braids): Insert the looped end of your pull-through into the braid near the crest until the loop pokes out from the bottom side of the braid. Thread the yarn ends through the pull-through loop. Pull the tool back up through the braid, bringing the yarn ends



RUNNING BRAID: Traditionally long-maned horses, like this Lusitano, are braided for dressage using a French-braid variation called the running braid

through the middle of the plait. Tie the yarn under the braid in a square knot by crossing the strings over each other twice; tighten; then tie the ends right over left, left over right. Bring the ends around to the front and make another square knot against the crest so that a little bump is created. Cut off the excess yarn and repeat down the neck.

Step 3 (for dressage buns): This style wraps the end of the braid around itself, securing the plait against the horse's neck. Use the pull-through tool as described above, but pull the entire braid through the middle of the plait (the end will be above the crest). Remove the yarn from the pull-through. Insert the tool back up through the base of the plait, loop pointed up. Wrap the end of the braid under the plait from right to left. Insert the ends of the yarn through the pull-through loop from back to front, and pull the yarn and what's left of the braid down through the plait. Make sure to keep the braid tight. Separate the ends of the yarn and bring them up above the crest. Hold the braid with your thumb and tie a square knot as above. The braid will lie flat. Cut the excess yarn and repeat down the neck.

Use the same techniques for the forelock. If you like, you can wrap white braiding tape around the top of each mane

More Braiding Tips from Charni Lewis

From Charni Lewis, author of *Braiding Manes and Tails*:

Unlike in the hunter/jumper world, in which manes are traditionally trained to lie on the right side of the horse's neck, dressage horses can be braided to either side.

The typical number of braids runs from nineteen to 22, according to Lewis; but let your horse's neck be the guide. "Fewer braids make the neck look shorter; more braids make it look longer," she says.

and forelock braid. Shoot for an even line down the length of the neck.

(Some riders leave their horses' forelocks unbraided. Traditionally the unbraided forelock signifies a stallion. A well-known example is the Danish stallion Calecto V, owned and ridden by Tina Konyot, whose hallmark is his luxuriant loose forelock.)

For long-maned horses: Some breeds, such as Friesians and Iberian horses, are traditionally shown with long manes. Instead of creating many separate neck braids, use a French "running" braid along the crest. Section a clump of mane about one and a half inches wide. Separate into three pieces and start braiding. With the first turn, gather a piece of mane into the braid. Work your way down the crest, gathering an even piece of mane into the braid each time. Be sure to keep the braid parallel to the neck. At the end, braid down and secure with a rubber band. Fold the braid up and secure again.

"You can also finish this braid with a bun," says Lewis.

How to: Trim a Tail

Although tail-braiding, as seen in the hunter/jumper world, is permitted in dressage competition, it's more customary in our sport to trim the hair at the top of the tail instead. But there are exceptions, as Lewis explains.

What you'll need: Set of clippers or trimmers with a #10 blade, scissors. If braiding: hair gel, rubber band.

For breeds shown with traditional (short) braided manes: Clipping the hair on the sides of the dock can help accentuate your horse's haunches. Using a #10 clipper blade, lightly pass or comb the clippers, teeth facing down, from the top of the dock to the middle of the tailbone, ending in the middle of the buttocks.

For breeds shown with long manes in a running braid: Leave the top of the tail natural. "French-braid the tail to the middle of the buttocks; then braid it a few turns down. Secure with a rubber band and let the excess hang down to blend in with the rest of the tail. If you prep the tail with gel, it can help hold those loose hairs in. I also put a bandage around this braid when I'm finished to protect it," Lewis says.

Dressage horses' tails are traditionally banged—trimmed straight across at the bottom. To bang the tail, hold the tailbone slightly away from the horse to mimic the way he carries it when he moves. "I hold the tailbone with my right hand and then run my left hand down, thumb down, to the length I prefer; the European way is to mid-cannon bone, but that's personal preference," Lewis says. "Let go of the tail with one hand, flip the end of the tail up with the other, and cut it straight across with a sharp pair of scissors."



DRESSAGE TAIL: *This warmblood's tail has been banded (trimmed straight across at the bottom), and the sides of the dock have been trimmed to accentuate the hindquarters*



LONG AND GORGEOUS: *Although some grooms pair the Iberian horse's running braid with a braided tail, it's equally common to see the tail left natural. Either way, it's encouraged to be as full and lush as possible.*

How to: Fit a Dressage Saddle Pad

A saddle pad may seem an easy thing to fit, but here's one area where correct size is more than an aesthetic concern: A poorly fitting pad can actually cause your horse discomfort.

Beth Haist, owner of The Horse of Course tack shop in Claremore, OK, says the most critical measurement in a traditional square dressage saddle pad is the drop, which describes the distance from midway along the pad's spine to the bottom of the pad.

"Your pad shouldn't exceed the length of the saddle flap by more than an inch or so," says Haist. "If it's too long, it will bunch up under the girth. You should have enough length so that you can pull the pad up into the gullet of the saddle, which allows freedom for the withers." (Better pads usually are contoured to allow for the withers, as well.)

The length of the pad from pommel to cantle is also important. If the pad is too short from front to back, the saddle will rest on the edges of the pad and create one or more pressure points, Haist says. (A too-short pad also bears an unattractive resemblance to a tutu.) On the flip side, a too-long pad will swamp the horse.

"It should extend an inch or two past the panel of the cantle. Some saddles have underneath panels that extend

past the panel of the cantle, so make sure the pad fits past that," Haist says.

To get an idea of size, measure your saddle from the middle of the seat to the bottom of the flap and from the front of the pommel to the back of the panel. ➔

Helmet or Hat?

Current US Equestrian Federation rules state that, at USEF-licensed/USDF-recognized dressage competitions, anyone mounted on a horse must wear protective headgear except for those aged eighteen and older who are competing at Prix St. Georges and above.

A rider who is competing the same horse at both national (Training-Fourth) levels and FEI (PSG-Grand Prix) levels must wear protective headgear at all times. In other words, if you are competing the same horse at Fourth Level and PSG, you must wear protective headgear, regardless of your age. If you are showing the horse only at PSG (or Intermediate or Grand Prix) and you're eighteen or older, you may choose to ride in either a top hat or a helmet.



CORRECT PAD FIT: *This traditional square dressage saddle pad is large enough to cover the saddle and flaps but not so long that it bunches up under the girth. The pad's rounded edges are flattering on this shorter-backed horse.*

The pad needs to fit both your saddle and your horse. "A pony saddle pad might fit a horse that's fifteen hands, but it won't fit an eighteen-inch saddle. A properly fitting pad should frame the saddle a little bit," says Haist. Particularly in the case of a short-backed or delicately built horse, the trick is to find a pad that's big enough to accommodate the saddle without making him look as if he's wearing a blanket.

"If you're having problems finding the right size, consider a custom pad," Haist says. "You can buy a nice custom pad for thirty-nine dollars. I prefer pads with a felt lining because they keep their shape, even after washing, and look smart in the show ring."

From an aesthetic standpoint, rounded edges look best on smaller horses, according to Haist. Square-edged and swallowtail pads are attractive on long-backed horses because the lines visually shorten the back, she says.

To keep your pad looking good, Haist advises giving the outside material a liberal coating of Scotchgard. Hang to dry before you ride in the pad. According to Haist, a pad thus treated will remain stain-free for two years. "You can even do this with your show clothes, especially white breeches," she says.

If you use a half-pad on top of your regular saddle pad, its size is important, too. Half-pads come in different lengths, so choose the one that suits your saddle length.

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APPLYING POLO WRAPS: *With each turn, the groom strives for even tension and equal overlap*

How to: Apply Polo Wraps

There are many forms of equine leg protection, but the classic dressage look is the polo wrap. Polo wraps are fleece bandages that secure with hook-and-loop strips. Unlike thin stable bandages, which are designed to be applied over cushioned wraps, polo wraps are usually applied directly to the leg, although some riders use thin cushioned pads underneath for extra protection.



FINISHED PRODUCT: *Applied properly, the polo wrap comes down to cover the fetlock, creating an upside-down-V appearance at the front of the leg. The fasteners are on the outsides of the legs so the horse can't tear them off.*

As with any leg bandage, ensuring a snug (not tight) fit with even pressure throughout is key. "A little bit of tension is important, but not enough to restrict the tendons," says Lewis. "Whenever you tighten or take the slack out, do so against the front of the cannon bone and not against the tendons." ➔

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From the Judge's Perspective

You only have one chance to make a first impression on a dressage judge, so make sure it's a good one.

Proper turnout tells the judge that you care and that you pay attention to details. Above all else, make sure that you and your horse are neat and tidy, says US Equestrian Federation "S" judge Melissa Creswick, Clovis, CA, a member of the USEF Dressage Committee and a board member of the California Dressage Society.

"I don't care if your tack or your show clothes are high-dollar. They should be clean, well-fitting, and appropriate for the level," Creswick says.

The most common show-turnout *faux pas* Creswick sees is an ill-fitting and poorly adjusted bridle. She points out that not only does it look unattractive, but it also can hinder the horse's performance.

"I see lots of issues: nosebands fitted too low; flash nosebands too tight; browbands too loose and banging on the forehead or not sitting square across the brow; or worst of all, the bit clanking on the horse's teeth because it's hanging too low," Creswick says.

Are you certain that your horse's bit and bridle fit and are adjusted correctly? If not, then seek guidance from an experienced professional.

Dirty tack that looks rough and dry also makes Creswick's list of "don'ts." It looks bad; what's more, leather that's not properly cared for can crack and become a safety hazard. Clean and condition leather regularly. Replace cracked or worn bridle parts, reins, stirrup leathers, and billet straps. If stitching is loose, missing, or rotting, repair or replace the item.

When Creswick sits at "C," she sees a lot of riders whose coats don't fit well. "The biggest thing I see is coats that are too tight," she says. "The arms look stuffed into the sleeves so the rider can barely move. I'd rather see bagginess because the rider has some freedom."

Although you wouldn't want to ride in a coat and white breeches every day, avoid treating your show clothes and tack like formal attire kept only for special occasions, Creswick advises. They should be broken in and comfortable for you and your horse. That's not to say your equipment should be put into the everyday lineup; but a pristine bridle with stiff reins, a saddle pad fresh out of the plastic, and riding boots that rarely come into contact with a horse will feel strange come show day.

"Try out your show equipment, especially boots, because those can impede your performance," says



NEAT AND TIDY: Even at a schooling show, this child and pony are nicely turned out with clean and well-fitting tack and attire. The effort shows respect for the judge.

Creswick. "Make sure the saddle pad is soft and formed to the horse's back so he isn't uncomfortable. Give your things a test ride two weeks before the show so you'll know what fits and what doesn't. No one wants to make show breeches dirty, but often after they're washed for the first time the fit changes or there's a compromised feel. Maybe they shrank in the waist or in the rise. You don't want to have that problem on the day."

Blinky browbands, super-fancy saddle pads, and the like may look great in the shop or in the catalog, but make sure that they flatter your horse before you take them down center line, Creswick cautions. For instance, if your horse is built "downhill," a swallowtail saddle pad can act as an arrow pointing straight to the high croup, she says.

"Be smart," says Creswick. "Don't draw attention to faults with your equipment. I always say to keep it simple and you will be fine. And don't draw attention to yourself, either. The focus should always be on showing off your horse."

Last, make a pre-ride checklist and give a copy to a helper to help avoid making turnout mistakes resulting from pre-show jitters. "For instance," says Creswick, "they don't take the time to tighten the girth, and so they make themselves unstable."

Start by rolling the polo wrap with the fuzzy “loop” strip of the Velcro turned toward the hooks (if your wraps are brand-new, you’ll have to unroll and reroll them before use) so that on the final pass the strips will be in the right position for fastening.

There’s more than one way to apply a polo wrap, but here’s how Lewis does it:

“Set the tail of the wrap at the inside of the cannon bone, below the horse’s knee, with the roll flat against the leg. Roll the bandage toward you [clockwise for right legs; counterclockwise for left legs] and make a turn around itself to anchor the wrap.

“On the next turn, cover three-quarters of that first wrap. Work your way down, switching hands as needed, covering each wrap three-quarters down until you reach the area where the sesamoid bones are.”

At the fetlock, “Loop the wrap just below the ergot to make a little sling. Bring that up so it comes just diagonally above the pastern. Go straight around the back of the ankle and over the ergot one more time to make a second sling. Make sure that no leg is showing at the back.

“Work your way back up the leg, each time overlapping the wrap by half, until you get to where you started, below the knee. The fastener should be on the outside facing back-

ward so the horse can’t tear them off. With your average-length wrap, this leaves you with one and a half revolutions at the top. If you have more than one and it doesn’t come up perfect, work the bandage back down and then up to adjust.”

Veterinary experts say that it doesn’t matter which way you apply the polo bandage, clockwise or counterclockwise. However, the traditional method that Lewis describes does ensure that the fastener ends up on the outside of the leg, where it can’t be ripped loose.

The Finishing Touch

A great braiding job or a gorgeous tail can’t substitute for solid dressage training and veterinary care, of course. But used as finishing touches on a well-schooled, well-cared-for horse, they can give your show-ring look that extra something special and boost your pride and confidence on the big day. ▲

Sharon Biggs is a dressage instructor based in Northwest Indiana. She is the co-author of The Original Horse Bible (BowTie Press), Advanced English Riding (BowTie Press), and In One Arena: Top Dressage Experts Share Their Knowledge Through the Levels (Half Halt Press).

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