

A woman wearing a black riding helmet, a dark navy blue jacket, white breeches, and black boots is riding a brown horse. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows an outdoor riding arena with a fence and trees.

Less Bounce to the Ounce

Sports bras for dressage riders

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHARONFIBELKORN.COM

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

Riding—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. ➔