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Serving the Apparel,
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R E T A I L E R

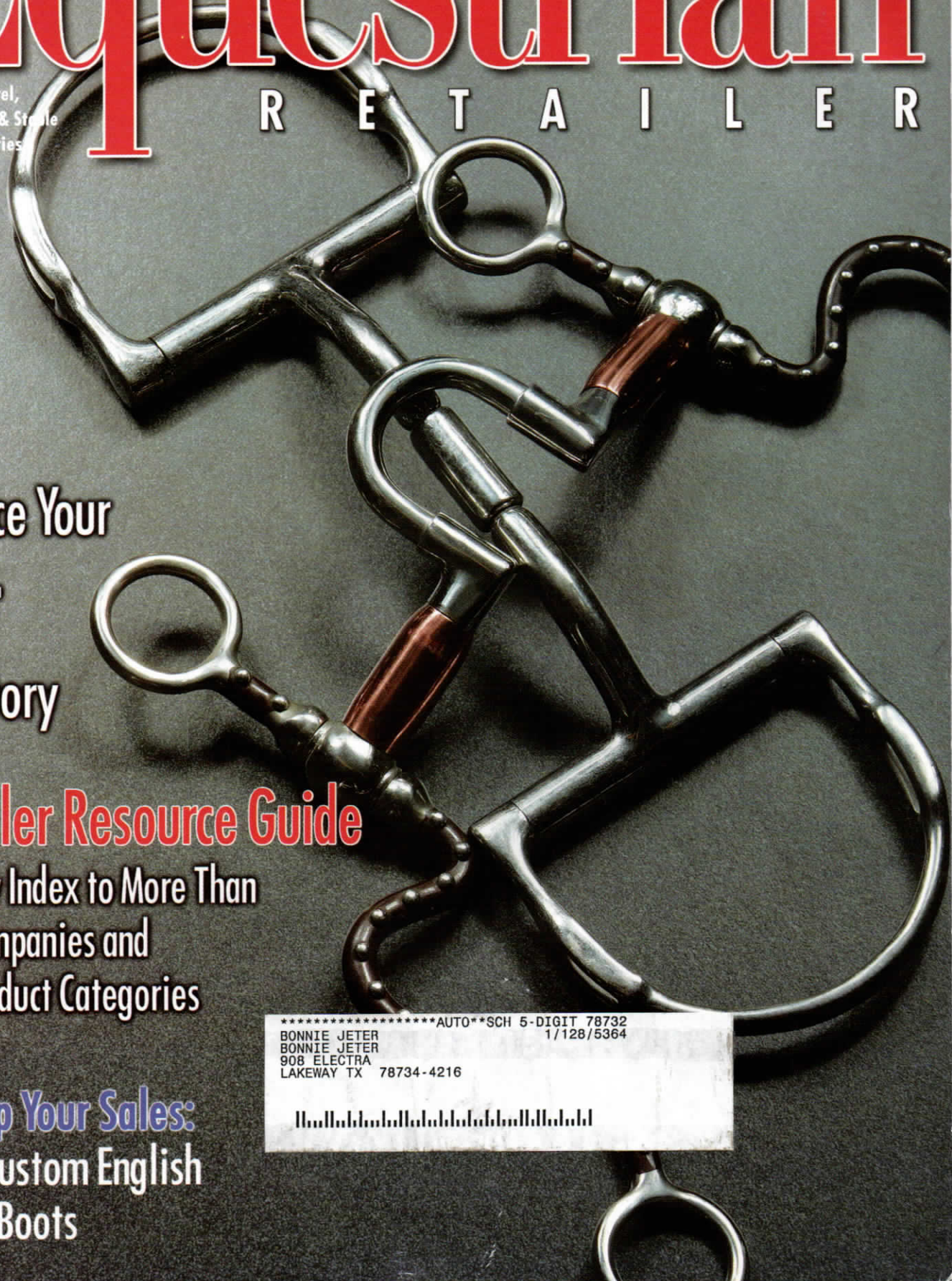
Balance Your
Bit
Inventory

Retailer Resource Guide

A Handy Index to More Than
800 Companies and
200 Product Categories

Kick Up Your Sales:
Offer Custom English
Riding Boots

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KICK UP Your Heels

Outfit your high-end equestrians in a pair of custom English boots.

By Bonnie Jeter

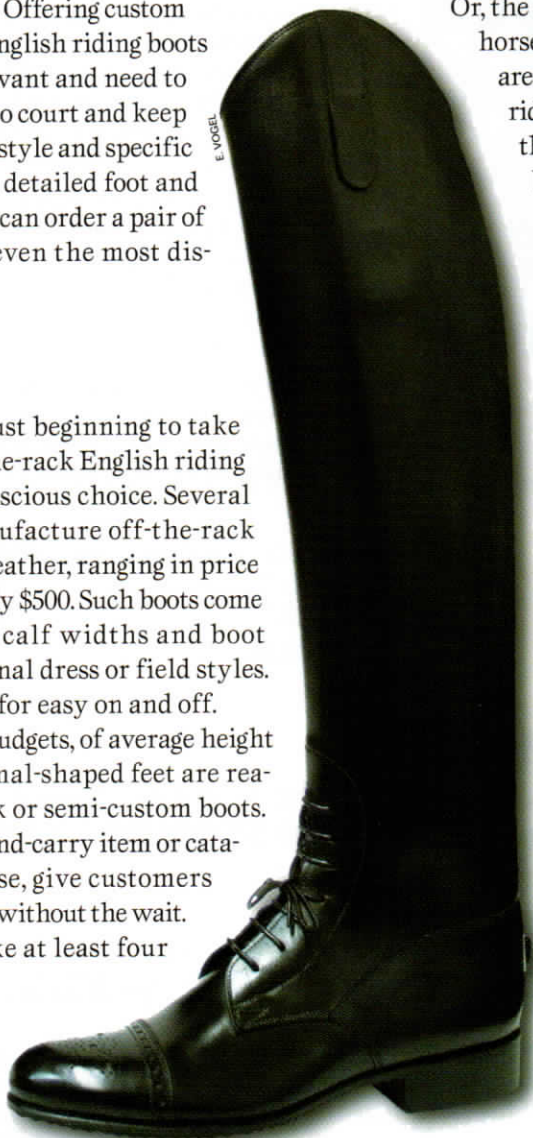
Most retailers agree: Offering custom or semi-custom English riding boots is a service they want and need to provide in order to court and keep high-end customers. With a style and specific features in mind, as well as detailed foot and leg measurements, retailers can order a pair of custom boots made to fit even the most discriminating English rider.

Why Sell Custom

For the entry-level rider just beginning to take weekly lessons, a tall, off-the-rack English riding boot is a stylish, safety-conscious choice. Several reputable companies manufacture off-the-rack boots in varying grades of leather, ranging in price from as little as \$100 to nearly \$500. Such boots come in a variety of foot sizes, calf widths and boot heights, and in the traditional dress or field styles. Some even contain zippers for easy on and off.

Customers on moderate budgets, of average height and weight, and with normal-shaped feet are reasonable candidates for rack or semi-custom boots. Rack boots, usually a cash-and-carry item or catalog mail-order merchandise, give customers something to quickly ride in, without the wait. (Full custom boots can take at least four months to receive.)

What about the overly petite or excessively tall rider with foot and leg proportions outside the “average” range?



Or, the busy professional who rides four to five horses a day, and walks miles around a dusty arena giving lessons to yet another four or five riders? As equestrians move up the levels of their sports and spend longer hours in their boots, precise fit with the highest degree of comfort, along with additional aesthetic and functionality features, becomes crucial. Enter the full custom boot.

“There’s more available to the consumer today in terms of being able to go into a tack shop and walk out with a pair of boots,” says Jack Lynch, director of operations for E. Vogel Boots and Shoes, a 125-year-old, New York-based custom-boot company. “But I don’t believe customers get the same kind of fit or quality in off-the-rack boots as they do in custom boots. There’s no way around it; they get what they pay for. A customer can easily spend \$400 on a rack boot. Instant gratification, yes, but not always the best or closest fit.”

The Vogel company, a family-owned business started by Egidius Vogel in 1879, and maker of custom boots for dressage riders to steeplechase jockeys, sells full custom boots that average \$700 per pair. The Vogel’s new Young Rider full custom

E. Vogel’s handcrafted Fieldmaster boot combines function, fit and elegance, and is suitable for show jumping, hacking or pleasure riding.



Hard-core and hard-to-fit riders invest in the comfort and performance of custom English riding boots.

boot, however, retails for \$599. The bootmaker buys the best leather and components available to construct its footwear and, providing the consumer takes care of the product, the boots wear extremely well and often outlast lesser-quality models, the manufacturer says.

At The Dehner Company Inc., a family-owned custom-boot manufacturer located in Omaha, Nebraska, bootmakers are busy fashioning a wide array of styles, from field boots for the hunt-seat rider to police boots for the Los Angeles Police Department. Dehner caters to every English riding discipline and even manages to cross disciplines. For instance, dressage competitors can also wear the company's fox-hunt boots with removable cuffs.

"One of the biggest differences between a custom boot and a stock boot is that a stock boot comes one way and one way only," says Tara Munguia, a Dehner representative. "Stock boots are an option for riders with money constraints, but they can't always accommodate variations in feet size and shape, or body weight. With custom boots, not only do riders get an accurate fit, but they also can request zippers, for instance; toe caps on field boots; or, Italian tops with 2¼-inch flairs on the outsides of the boots."

Tim Gerwing, president of Alberta Boot Company Inc., in Canada, agrees. "Custom orders can become extremely detailed, especially when we're addressing foot anomalies or leg problems, such as a rider with a fused ankle or one leg an inch shorter than the other," he explains.

"There really isn't a stock boot that compares with a full custom boot, especially a fully lined custom boot," adds Sheila Whaley, manager of Rick's Heritage Saddlery in West Chester, Pennsylvania. "However, there are more customers who can afford rack boots than full custom pairs. We see many teenagers who enter the riding sport without the money for full customs. Their parents are just starting out, trying to buy tack and apparel the kids need.

"The professionals I work with who ride several horses a day, order a new pair of custom boots about every 2 years," she continues. "They usually have one really good pair to wear, a pair in the wings and an old pair to knock around in while they teach."

Plush Perks

Providing custom boots can enhance a retailer's reputation as a full-service business and a knowledgeable source in the industry. That's important when the goal is to attract long-term, high-end spenders. Additionally, selling custom boots means a retailer can cater to hunter-jumper and dressage enthusiasts, and any polo players, steeplechase riders or fox-hunters in the area.

"There are so many different options available to customers that it's very important to determine what type

Custom Care

How to maintain custom boots.

Regular and proper care of custom boots is important to extend the boots' lifespan. That's why it's important to read and understand the literature provided by the custom-boot manufacturer, and follow the suggestions below, so you can advise customers on custom boot care.

- To help maintain the integrity and shape of the boot, always support the boot through the throat with a boot tree. (Rolled up newspapers work well, too.) Properly inserted shoetrees maintain the integrity of the foot area.
- Clean the boots when they're still warm from wear, as opposed to a day later when they're dry and cold. Use a soft towel or sponge dampened with plain water—or clean with products recommended by the manufacturer to remove dirt, sweat and dust from the boots. Traditional saddle soap can be overly harsh on custom boot leather, resulting in drying and cracking of the leather.
- Remove mud from the soles and between seams, where the foot meets the sole.
- Avoid black shoe polish, which will rub off on breeches, saddlery and the sides of your horse.
- Clean zippers regularly with a small brush, so that they open and close easily.
- Store in a dry, well-ventilated area.

of riding they do, what they expect out of their custom boots and which styles suit them best," says Whaley. "We sell Vogels and semi-customs made by Der Dau of Brooklyn, New York, that are similar in look. We also sell Dehners, which are quite different. I guide our customers toward the boot shapes I think they might prefer, and ask them what they like best."

Planning an order for custom boots begins with choosing a "look" best suited to the rider; next, come the details. "Ordering a Vogel boot is like ordering a new car," says Lynch. "In a dressage boot we offer a square toe or traditional Vogel toe. We can do a regular stiff lining and an extra-stiff lining, similar to German-made boots. Although generally, American riders prefer less heavy, less stiff dressage boots. We can also make a softer inside panel (for improved rider-horse feel and communication).

"Our highest cut tops are called the Puissance tops," he continues. "We also do Spanish and traditional tops. We can make boots with zippers on the inside of the legs and a whalebone stay down the back. Customers

can request Goodyear welted construction soles on the boots, rubber ribbed soles, heavy leather or thin leather soles. There's so much that can be done with a custom boot. We literally build the boot from scratch so all the options are there."

Manufacturers are happy to provide a sample boot or half-boot to retailers as a sales tool and demo. The Dehner Company's minimum order is one pair, allowing retailers to represent more than just one boot company.

"We've done more direct sales from our home office during the past 5 years via the Internet," says Munguia. "However, we think riders will get good customer service if they go to retail stores and allow the staff to explain all the available options. Most of the time, the retailer has a boot in stock for the customer to see and touch."

Court the High-End Customer

Talk to any English rider who's ever tried to measure herself for a semi-custom or custom boot, and the importance of getting it right becomes crystal clear. A half-inch off here or there can make for a foot too short, a shaft too tall or an ankle too loose, resulting in a painful, ineffective ride. Then the entire return process ensues, which calls for time and money invested in shipping misfits back and forth to the bootmakers.

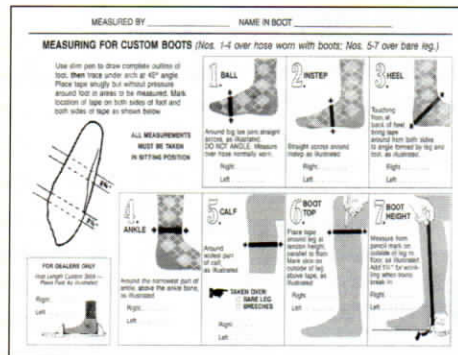
Retailers are in the position to give educated opinions on what boot upgrades work best for which riders, and assist first-time custom buyers with detailed measuring. Munguia suggests retailers instruct riders to avoid ordering custom boots at the same time they're beginning a strict weight-loss or exercise program, because those factors will change their physique.

"Practice makes better when measuring a rider for a custom boot," adds Whaley. "I don't ever try to second guess how the boots will be made. It's important to make sure the rider has on the breech weight and sock style she plans to wear when riding. With the correct measurements, bootmakers can do excellent jobs."

The Perfect Fit

Assist customers with detailed measurements.

Full custom boots are an investment, and often can't be returned, so it's critical that your customers get the exact style and fit they desire. To ensure customer satisfaction, E. Vogel Custom Boots uses the following measurements for full custom boots.



Whaley has the ability to stretch boots in her shop, if necessary, so they fit better in the calf, foot, throat or boot top. "We can't stretch much in the toe box, and we can't do anything about the length of the shoe itself," she explains. "We can stretch behind the toe box of a field boot to ease tight places there and make them more comfortable, but people shouldn't wear boots too tight anyway. They aren't sneakers or loafers; they're riding boots."

Patricia Seely, president of Valley Tack Shop in Ohio, says custom manufacturers make order forms fairly "idiot proof." Although custom English riding boots are one of the hardest items Seely has in her shop to fit, she says that Dehner gives her an excellent chart to measure by and, if she follows it correctly, she's pretty certain to get a correct fit.

Custom Boot Features

Educate customers on available custom-boot upgrades.

Following is a list of just some of the add-ons available on a custom English riding boot. Check with your manufacturer to determine which upgrade is available and at what fee.

Leather Types
Zippers
Spanish Tops

Regular Tops
Olympic Tops
Italian Tops

Puissance Tops
Punched Toe Caps
Spur Rests

Gussets
Lining Types
Sole Types

Perforated Toe Caps
Cushion Insoles
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Niche Market

One company profits from a specialty market.

Although Alberta Boots' forte is western boots, the downtown Calgary business profits from a specialty market, making Strathcona High Brown riding boots for the 20,000-member Royal Canadian Mounted Police, as well as Black Strathconas for the Dallas Police.

In fact, the RCMP is Gerwing's biggest customer. "Every member of the RCMP is issued a pair of the High Brown boots, and they order some 2,000 pairs from us each year," says Tim Gerwing, president.

Most RCMP boots are cut with standard dyes and then custom stretched at the RCMP Depot, explains Gerwing. "For those riders outside the stock-boot parameters, we take all the various leg measurements and hand-cut materials. We've developed a niche market that allows us to cater to riders' specific needs," he adds.

Gerwing is developing a tall, English-style boot for RCMP officers. It'll have a blunt toe, a lower heel and a contoured shaft. When complete, the boot will be offered to other English riders. "Once we develop a product, it's important to be open to other markets," says Gerwing.

Seeley sells tack and riding apparel to many 4-Hers who can't or don't want to pay for custom boots. So, she stocks rack boots in several calf widths in the popular ladies seven to 10 size range. "We keep a large inventory in our lower-priced lines. I find if I don't have them in stock, I lose sales.

"The problem: I obviously can't fit every rider with an off-the-rack boot," she concedes. "Even though we carry four different boot lines, there are still people who need a custom pair. I figure that offering custom boots is a

good service to my customers."

"We're here to please our customers," agrees Linda Wiggins, owner of the Tack Shack in Oviedo, Florida. "It's no trouble to do a custom boot order. It doesn't take much more time than it does any other special order." ■

Bonnie Jeter is a free-lance writer and amateur dressage rider from Austin, Texas. In addition to a bachelor's degree in equine science, she has more than 14 years' experience writing in the equine, health-care and business industries.

Retailer Resources

A Handy Guide to Article Sources and Advertisers

Alberta Boot Co. Inc.: 403-263-4605; www.albertaboot.com

Cavallos: www.cavallo-online.de

The Dehner Company Inc.: 402-342-7788; www.dehner.com

Der Dau Custom made Boots and Shoes: 718-336-4513; www.derdau.com

E. Vogel Custom Boots and Shoes: 212-925-2460; www.vogelboots.com

Koonigs: www.equinet.de/koenigs