

CREATE YEAR-ROUND HOLIDAY SALES

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Equestrian

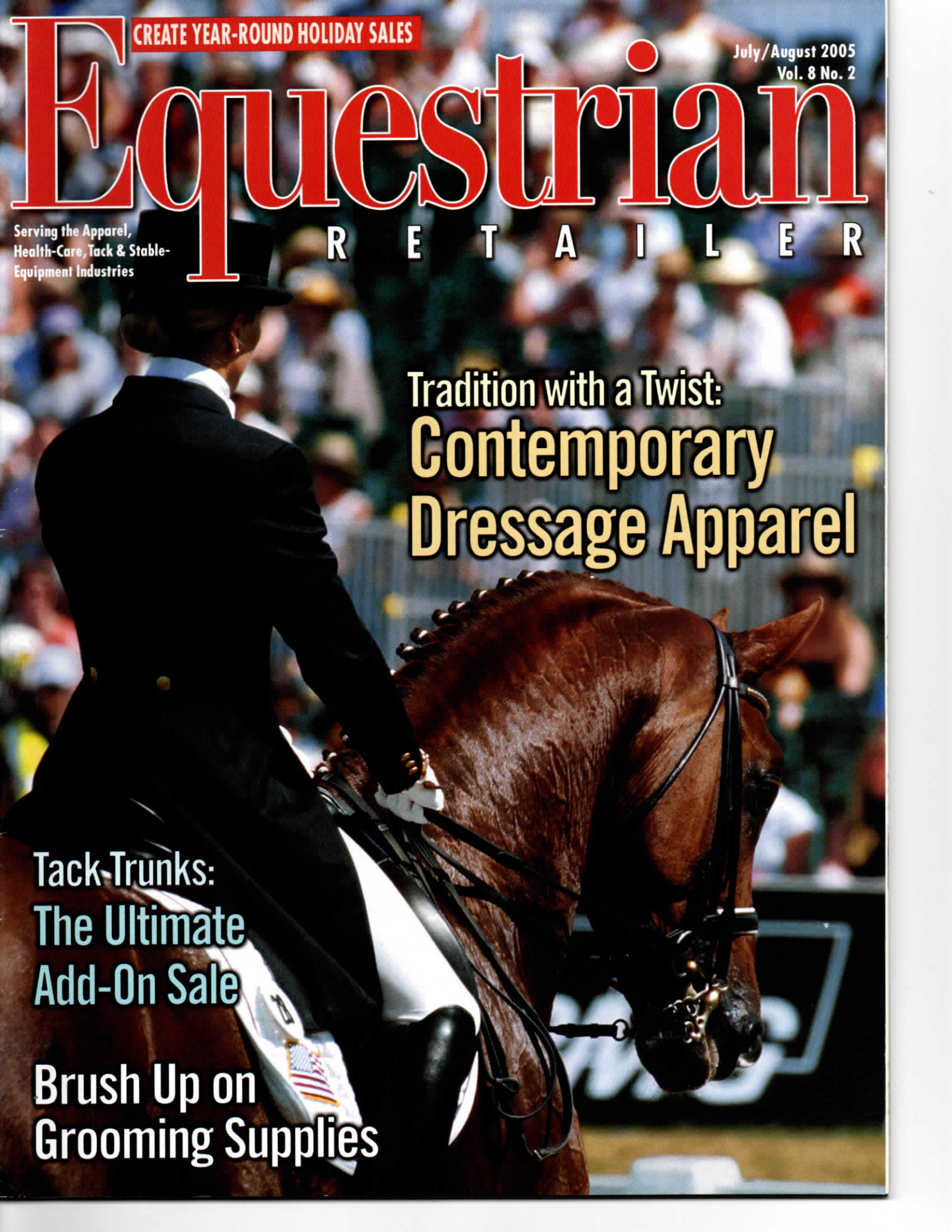
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R E T A I L E R

Tradition with a Twist:
**Contemporary
Dressage Apparel**

Tack-Trunks:
The Ultimate
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APPAREL

Dressage Apparel

Tradition *with a* TWIST

In the arena, competitive dressage riders wear classic attire, including a black or navy-blue coat, white breeches and gloves, and black hat/helmet and dress boots.



Dressage apparel has a reputation for being formal and conservative, but high-tech comfort and contemporary colors are becoming key selling points of this classic category.

By Bonnie Jeter

Dressage is a riding sport and Olympic discipline steeped in history, sophistication and tradition. It has been long revered in many European countries, dating back 2,000 years with roots in classical Greek horsemanship.

In the last several decades, this sport of precision – likened to figure-skating compulsory tests – has piqued the public's interest and is quickly gaining recognition. From 1990 to 2000, United States Dressage Federation memberships increased an astounding 104 percent.

"Riders approaching 35 to 40 years old are trading their hunter/jumper saddles for dressage saddles," says Nina DePetris, vice president of JPC Equestrian in Drums, Pennsylvania. "The representatives I've talked to in associations and tack stores indicate dressage is definitely a growing sport."

Part of dressage's appeal is aesthetics. A horse and rider dancing in perfect unison, dressed in well-fitting garments and tack, are formal and elegant. That's where your store comes in: Dressage riders need somewhere to turn for the latest looks in their discipline.

The customary dressage uniform is easily recognizable: white breeches,

black coat, crisp white shirt with stock tie, white gloves, black boots and black hat. Subtle apparel differences distinguish a first-level rider from a professional competing at the Grand Prix level, a test of the highest standard demanding the most spectacular movements. However, color and high-tech fabrics are entering this market, giving retailers more selling power than ever before.

For the latest trends in this influential apparel category, we consulted leading dressage-apparel manufacturers and retailers. Read on for their observations, plus coat-fitting tips (see "Classic Fit" on page 18) and which basics you should stock (see "Promote the Look" on page 19).



Perfect Your Market

According to a USDF member survey conducted by the Bureau of Business Research, 42 percent of respondents allocate a minimum of \$500 annually to riding attire. Given the fact that the shadbelly or "tailcoat" required in all International Equestrian Federation level tests (Prix St. Georges through Grand Prix) retails between \$300 and \$800 alone, an upper-level rider might

spend considerably more than \$500 during any given calendar year. Retailers bridge the gap between product manufacturers and consumers, standing to add big-spenders to their client list if they sell superior-quality dressage apparel.

"The ability to sell high-end clothing depends on the individual retailer's market," DePetris confirms. "We offer products at a wide range of price points. Retailers can look at their particular demographics to determine what their customers are willing to spend."

Dressage for young children and teenagers aspiring to excel in the USDF Young Rider Program is coming on strong. JPC Equestrian is one manufacturer promoting a children's full-seat breech. "Dressage is growing, and we're here to grow with it," DePetris says. "Young riders need apparel, too, and they want the styles their trainers and parents wear."

Shannon Shaffer, general manager of Beval Saddlery adds, "Many of our hunter/jumper riders are moving into dressage, and we might develop a larger department to serve their needs." Beval has two East Coast shops: one in Connecticut and another in New Jersey. ➔



High-tech fabrics are making their way into dressage apparel, keeping riders cool and comfortable. Tropical Rider's Extreme breech is made from Holofiber®, a fabric that not only wicks moisture and offers support, but also enhances circulation.

Classic Fit

Judy Urban and her husband, Rick, operate Campbell/Urban training center in Boerne, Texas. They work with horses and riders from training level through Grand Prix, and help their students achieve proper coat fit.

"Coat fitting depends on the rider's build," Urban explains. "Riders with small, trim waistlines look better in a fitted coat, such as the Pikeur Diana. It's made with an actual trimline that accentuates the waist. (Dressage Extensions, a Southern-California retailer and catalog business, retails the Diana coat for \$399.95.)

"Heavy-set riders or those with straight waists look more attractive in coats made by Cavallo (because they're not as fitted as the Pikeur Diana)," she continues.

Urban also says that the coat should be fitted and cover a rider's *derriere*. "It shouldn't look pulled or stretched around the buttons or seams."

Fabric is another important consideration in certain climates. "Pikeur makes a 'tropical weight' wool that's lighter for riders who live in warm climates. Although, a heavier weight wool probably lasts longer," Urban explains. "Many brands of dressage coats come in washable fabrics now, too."

The Dynamic Dressage Wardrobe

Dressage training follows "classical" principles, meaning they're time-tested, work on most horses and are used internationally. Not surprisingly, basic dressage show apparel follows suit. The United States Equestrian Federation stipulates what's "acceptable" apparel for a test in a recognized competition. It hasn't deviated much since the sport began to surface in the United States.

What has evolved is manufacturers' attention to detail and willingness to push the fashion envelope. Breeches, show shirts and coats made in wickable, breathable, technologically advanced fabrics are becoming the norm. What's more, there are visible changes to former protocol, such as the increased acceptance of dark-navy-blue or anthracite-colored coats in competition, and trendy low-rise breeches for schooling.

Women's clothing choices are dictated by the fashion industry, and the equestrian community hasn't remained immune to its effects. "We still see the trend toward the low-rise breech," DePetris confirms. "In everyday wear,

the fashion industry has catered to women with a low-rise pant."

JPC is just one company that's introduced competition shirts in bright colors, made from stretchable cotton fabric with a vented back. The sleeve cuffs remain white, and a white stock tie and dressage coat conceal the body color. Between classes, riders remove the coat, and the colorful shirt body brightens the outfit. "We've seen this trend sell very well," DePetris claims.

Standard fare for daily training used to be a pair of beige or dark-colored breeches paired with any short or long-sleeved cotton shirt, half-chaps, paddock boots and a schooling helmet. Today, riders seek apparel that doesn't trap uncomfortable heat and moisture. Colorful T-shirts made in a lightweight, wickable microfiber, sleeveless polos, full-seat breeches in pretty plaids or microcord, full-seat pull-on tights in such colors as bluegrass, sable or taupe – the choices are endless.

Helmets are continually updated and improved to feature more air vents, and dress boots are designed with zippers for easy on and off. Walk into any tack store or flip through a mail-order catalog, and you'll see something new introduced at the turn of every season. ➔

Promote The Look

Some dressage riders grow up in the sport, while others launch their riding careers in college or pursue the sport as a hobby. No matter when and how they got started, your customers have similar apparel needs. Make your store the go-to place for all their dressage apparel by stocking the items suitable to their riding program.

William Woods University in Fulton, Missouri, was the first U.S. institution to offer an equine-science baccalaureate program. Its riding program began in 1924. Here's its required wardrobe for dressage riders. The list is consistent with overall industry standards.

Everyday Wear

- Breeches.
- Polo shirt or nice T-shirt, sweater or sweatshirt (all should fit neatly).
- Dress or field boots, or paddock boots with half-chaps.
- Gloves for warm and cold weather.
- American Society for Testing Materials-approved/Safety Equipment Institute-certified safety helmet (see "Gear Up for Safety," May/June '05).
- Long hair neatly pulled back into a ponytail or secured under the helmet.

Show Wear

- Black dressage or hunt coat preferred; dark gray or navy hunt coat acceptable.
- White breeches preferred; cream or beige breeches acceptable; full seats or with knee patches.
- Black dress boots preferred; black field boots acceptable.
- White long- or short-sleeve ratcatcher shirt.
- White polo shirt for hot weather showing and schooling shows.

- Stock tie with pin, untied preferred; pretied acceptable.
- White or black gloves.
- Black hunt cap, black derby or top hat depending on level. Upper-level and Grand Prix competitors opt for top hats, whereas lower-level riders tend to buy black hunt caps or derbys.
- Hair pulled back in hairnet or secured under hat/helmet; stud earrings only.



Stock the staples to help dressage customers of all levels achieve a classic look.



JPC, a leader in high-tech English apparel, offers these lightweight, full-seat stretch breeches and knitted shirt, which double for schooling or show. The breeches combine the comfort of cotton with the performance of microfiber, and feature side pockets with snaps and a front zipper. The shirt, made of Aerocool® fabric, wicks moisture and conforms to a rider's body. With a zip neck and stand-up collar, it can be worn casually or with a stock tie for a formal show look.

"Dressage riders are still very conservative," says Judy Urban of Campbell/Urban training center in Boerne, Texas, "but I love adding color to my daily wear for lessons and clinics."

Product designers are taking the technological movement one step further by creating undergarments – such as socks, panties, top and bottom base layers, under-breech liners and brassieres – to be just as cool, soft and wickable.

"There are so many lines of dressage clothing to carry," points out Lynne Boyer, owner of Boerne Stage Saddlery, also in Boerne, Texas. "Although my customers would like for me to carry all the lines, I simply can't. I keep a full stock of tried-and-true designs. As one of my customers says, 'It's important to look good!'"

"Beginners tend to be shocked at the prices of breeches and boots," she adds, "so I also sell garments at entry-level price points. I don't stock high-end coats, such as shadbellies; those are special order."

"Dressage riders are coming around to new ideas," agrees Sheree Ganske, chief executive officer and president of Tropical Rider. "The dressage community is asking for a side-zip, full-seat breech. Side-zip breeches have been around a long time in the hunt-seat world. Demand for water-resistant finish is another trend with show breeches and coats. We still sell the traditional microfiber breech from Schoellers, but now we market a pair in the dry skin that offers highly effective moisture management.

"Customers don't mind paying for high-performance fabrics," Ganske adds, "especially because we stand behind our products 100 percent."

Essex Classics, a 20-year-old company, concentrates solely on manufacturing and marketing high-quality equestrian shirts, retailing from \$65 to \$130. "For years, we sold beautiful, 100 percent cotton shirts, and now wickable Coolmax® fabric dominates the scene," says Cathy Sacher, president of Essex.

"We furnish a binder to our dis-

tributors with all of our different fabrics," Sacher adds. "If there's something particular a rider wants, it can be special ordered."

Push the Technology

Holofiber®, made by Wellman Inc., is one of the most astounding new products to hit the equestrian industry. Touted as the world's first body-responsive textile fiber, Holofiber has been scientifically proven to increase oxygenated blood flow. It works with a rider's body movement to build strength, increase energy and accelerate muscle recovery.

Ganske believes the equestrian market can bear the cost of new fabrics, such as Holofiber, especially consumers approaching age 50. "We have muscle aches and pains, and need relief," she admits. "Professionals who work all day in the saddle training horses appreciate this breech, because it truly seems to work."

Connect Through the Web

Most manufacturers have a Web site – an effective and vital way to connect online with their distributors. "We've created a site with a section specifically for tack-store owners," JPC's DePetris says. "We continually add JPC updates, sponsorships and new products. If retailers check the site regularly, they'll benefit by always staying up-to-date."

Present What You Sell

Simply put, attractive, well-thought-out displays sell more garments than a piecemeal approach; it's a retailing fact of life. Some customers, more than others, have an easy time coordinating a show outfit, but a strong display might save a newcomer who simply can't pull it all together.

"Displays show riders what they need to have, and I try to change ours at least once a month," Boyer says. "There's a



TROPICAL RIDER

Tropical Rider's new Borso d'Este collection of Italian dressage jackets includes the formal Fabio shadbelly for upper-level male riders. The calfskin-lined jacket contains Lycra®, which stretches to give riders freedom to move. Customers may add a splash of color to the collar or piping.



TROPICAL RIDER

The Alessia women's dressage jacket with shaped waist and velvet collar from Tropical Rider has a classic look.

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trend with riders to ask for ruffled stock ties. I've displayed a white show shirt with a ruffled collar, a black Pikeur dressage coat and a pair of white breeches so riders know the current look, in case they're not familiar with it.

"One of my customers came in and said, 'I'm going to a show and need one of those beret things' – when she really meant a derby. Everyone has to start somewhere, and displays help that along." ■



Der-Dau has added color to its line of custom-made field boots.