

Bridles and bits

Consider the horse's bridle, too. Andrew says there's a common mistake people make with the bit, which can affect the consistency of the contact.

"People worry that it's too high, so it can end up too low and if you touch the reins it moves. It should sit still in the mouth, so that when I touch the rein, I know which part of the mouth it's affecting," he explains. "And don't forget the noseband, as the fit or type will affect the bit's effect on the horse and therefore the contact."

Alaina points out that choosing the right size reins for your hand can make a big difference, too.

"Having a pair of reins that sit comfortably in your hand makes you ride with a better contact," she confirms.

"I don't like anything too wide as I don't feel I can close my fingers correctly around it. It needs to sit in the bottom joint of the hand and for a lot of women that's quite small."

WHAT YOU WEAR MATTERS

Even the clothes you choose to train in can make a difference to your schooling session. Alaina gives 'sticky-bum' breeches as an example.

"Some people don't feel comfortable without them, but some don't like the feeling of being glued to the saddle," she explains.

What you're wearing might seem like a small detail in the grand scheme of things, but Andrew says it's all about minimising distractions. Other examples he notes include: "Appropriate underwear! Plus, coat done up and hair tied back, so it's not coming into your line of vision."

Personal preference counts when it comes to being able to ride at your best



If you keep tack and kit for 'best', use it at home enough for it to feel familiar and comfortable

Every rein inch counts

Rein length is something many riders wrestle with, but as Andrew points out, it's worth spending time getting it right.

"The right rein length will put you in the most economical position. If the rein length is wrong, it knocks out your whole balance. The 'comfortable' length will encourage soft, effective hands and contact."

And he explains that the difference is less than you might think. "An inch either way will make a difference, we're not talking about huge amounts," he says.

Put yourself first

Some riders choose to keep a set of tack and kit for competition-use only. While having 'best' tack for show day might save on washing and cleaning, without

regular use, it's unfamiliar and possibly not as comfortable as your everyday kit. Consequently, there is a risk that it may affect how you ride.

"It's nice to have competition stuff, but ride in it on a regular basis," agrees Alaina. "The horse will feel the difference if you're not comfortable, for example if your boots are stiff and you don't put your leg on them in the same way."

Once you've done your tack and kit check, it's worth thinking about when you'll get the most out of your training sessions.

"The time of day can make a difference; you need to find the slot when you're best able to focus," says Andrew. "Get to know yourself and if that's before or after work."

Remember to fuel yourself as well.