

Written by Michele Vaughn
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Today's riders enjoy the luxury of fashion, function and fun in their apparel.

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Colorful jackets and bling on everything are just the outward signs of deeper changes in the dressage world. Athletic clothing design and technical performance fabrics for the rider complement evolving designs for tack and equipment. The dressage court has never been so trendy.



Changing rules are behind some of these changes, as are changing attitudes. Equestrians are athletes, just as much as participants in other sports, and they are looking for athletic apparel. Our horses are athletes as well, and riders are paying attention to the effect of equipment on performance results.

Although dressage has become more fashion forward and fun, it's important to always have your look complement your horse, not distract from it. For instance, if your helmet is totally covered in bling and you're showing outside on a sunny day, you could blind the judge. A touch of bling or color here or there is fun, but too much becomes a distraction.

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Gone are the days of sweltering in the California sun wearing a black wool show jacket. Today's colors include many shades of blue, gray, maroon, brown, green and more. Even better, fabrics now are washable, breathable, and stretch with you.

Show jacket designs are evolving as well – many are now cut closer to the body, with a tighter athletic fit and a shorter length. Some jackets feature zippers behind the front placket that makes the jacket look like it buttons, when actually it zips for easy on and off as well as a smoother fit for the athletic cut of the coat.

My original wool show coat now hangs in the closet and now I show in an Equiline jacket while Genay wears a For Horses USA jacket; both are Italian design and made of technical athletic fabrics. They breathe so we don't overheat, they are washable so we're not always running to the dry cleaners, and they have built-in stretch so we're always comfortable. Genay's shadbelly even has square blinged-out buttons that complement the piping around the color and vest points.

Stock ties have become more beautiful as well as more functional. The Dara James stock ties we wear come in a variety of gorgeous fabrics, have a smaller little "poof" under the chin that is more flattering, and the lower part of the tie can be spread to fill the jacket neckline so we can wear any kind of shirt under our jackets. Some are accented with tasteful jewelry touches for an even more elegant look.



Show shirts come in a lot of different choices, from cotton to high-performance moisture-wicking fabric. Long sleeves or short or sleeveless, it depends on your preferences. Some show shirts have ruffles on the front placket that replace the need for stock ties altogether. If you're into ruffles, this is a great alternative to the traditional shirt-and-stock-tie combination.

Functional, Too!

Sun protective shirts are everywhere these days, with long sleeves that have breathable mesh inserts for cooling, UPF 50 and above fabric that helps riders avoid skin cancer, and colors that range from white for showing to the most brilliant colors for every day.

Genay and I wear Kastel Denmark's sun protective shirts in the California and Florida sun. They are as great on hot days as they are under light layers when the weather cools off, and they are cozy under down jackets during the winter. Easy to launder and quick to drip dry, they make riding in any weather comfortable – and they look as good with jeans as they do with breeches.

Gloves have gone high tech – Genay's Roeckl gloves have touch-screen technology that lets her use her phone's touch pad so she doesn't have to take off her gloves every time she sends a text. They also are made of a breathable material that beats the old leather gloves that would get wet when your hands sweated in the heat.

Gloves are also available in every color imaginable, from the traditional white or black that is standard in the show ring, to colors that match your boots and breeches or complement colorful training outfits. For fun, you can even get them in colorful animal prints or camo patterns.

White breeches are still the standard in the show ring, although sometimes you'll see cream or tan. The fabrics and design, however, are a far cry from years ago. Designs have evolved from high waists and wide waistbands to low rise, while the jeans influence with back pockets have become popular even for show breeches. Bling can be found even on white show breeches, and some have piping in a contrasting color.

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Genay loves her For Horses USA breeches because they have gripper fabric on the full seat instead of leather so they are far more breathable, especially when riding in the Florida and California heat. She also likes their “bum lifting” technology that helps you look really good and fit.

Breeches range in style from athletic tights with pockets for cell phones to jeans with bling, and they come in every color you can imagine. Fabrics developed for the high performance athletic and outdoor apparel industries have become available in riding apparel, too.

Full seats that were once real leather now come in faux leather or silicone grip patterns. For summer, there are breeches with cooling technology woven into the fabric, while winter breeches are available with fleece inside for warmth and a smooth exterior to repel water, horse drool and hay.



Boots have become a fashion statement and a way to express your personality, with more colors, embellishments and designs than ever before. Boots for the show ring are popular in black patent leather for the ultimate in shine, and can be made with exotic leathers or leather embossed to resemble snakeskin, ostrich and other exotics. Colors in the show ring tend to be more conservative black or brown with bling at the edges or down the back zipper, while everyday boots are showing up in every color and style imaginable.

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Genay loves her DeNiro boots because in addition to looking great, they break in easily. Her show boots are brushed leather, which looks like patent but doesn't scratch like patent, and the tops are lined with Swarovski crystals for a little touch of bling that doesn't overpower the overall picture she and her horse present to the judge.

Headgear has gone from derbies in the good old days, to hunt caps, to top hats, but now almost everyone wears helmets. There are more helmet designs than you can count, with most brands offering customizing options that include cover materials in many colors, embellishment choices that include shiny and matte metal, crystals and even pearls.

Genay and I ride in KEP Italia helmets, which have a sleek design and a narrow fit that is very flattering and elegant as well as very safe. They have breathable air vents and a washable insert that can be taken out to wash any time. Genay's show helmet is covered in ostrich and has just a line of Swarovski crystals around the air vent in the front of the helmet.

Not everyone goes for understated elegance, however. At a show in Florida, Genay saw one rider with a big white helmet riding a horse with a bright white ear bonnet that really stood out from the crowd in the warm-up, and another rider wore a big silver helmet. There's no end to the options available.

Next month, part two will cover trends for horses.

Dressage Life author Michele Vaughn is a dressage rider and trainer who earned USDF gold and silver rider medals. She has coached her daughter Genay from her first ride through Grand Prix competition, and now coaches other riders as well. At her Starr Vaughn Equestrian in Elk Grove, CA, she breeds and trains champion Hanoverian sport horses, manages dressage and hunter/jumper shows, and hosts clinics and breed inspections. For more information, visit www.svequestrian.com

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