

Riding Attire Designed for Functionality, Part II

Perhaps one of the main reasons for men not to learn to ride English style is the look of those silly, tight-fitting riding pants. Most respectable macho types wouldn't be caught dead in them. Contrary to popular assumption, the style of riding breech was adapted out of practicality for both men and women. When astride in an English saddle, the only thing between three quarters of your human leg and the side of a horse is a stirrup leather, at most one inch wide horizontally. Breeches are a sensible choice for riding, as their design prevents rubbing caused by the saddle or the stirrup leathers. The breech is a style of riding pant that has no seam on the inner leg, so it aids in preventing nasty leg galls.

Riding trousers, or breeches, are reinforced at the knee or thigh. Some are a full seat, and the material can be leather, suede, man-made, goatskin, or deerskin. A close-fitting, rather than bulky, trouser is good when riding in the woods or across country. In competition (and here is where the "tight pants look" comes from), snug breeches accentuate the leg so that judges can see the proper placement of those legs in the hunter jumper and dressage circles. I know that tight pants, be they breeches or blue jeans, are just dumb to wear if a person is really spending a lot of time on a horse. They indeed are for a "look," and they make only that statement.

The other types of riding

pants are jodhpurs and the boot-cut flared pants one sees in the saddle-seat style. Both of these pants are long, like dress pants, but they have an elastic garter that either buttons or clips under a short boot to hold the pantleg from riding up. These types of pants are meant to be worn with the short paddock boot or the jodhpur boot. The jodhpur style of riding pants comes from the British Cavalry's time in India. Jodhpur is a province in that country, also called Marwar, in the central area of Rajasthan. There the native horsemen wore a wide upper pant with a close fit from the knee to the ankle, secured under the foot by a strap. A person can "date" riding breeches these days by how wide the upper part of the breech is. The older the pants, the wider the breech.

I've often found that many of the older pants are much better made, in stitching and structure. These will outlast even the very expensive breeches of today. It seems that makers of riding apparel used higher quality linen thread 40 and 50 years ago. More attention was paid to cut, with comfort in mind, without forsaking a lasting sense of style.

Nowadays you can find all kinds and colors of pants, including the form-fitting lime green and orange-splashed trek pants, akin to cycling attire. Some jockeys still wear real silk breeches or a silk-nylon counterpart. Why? Because it's



a material that is durable, breathable, and very light. No, they don't offer much protection, but this is not the function of their design.

A hundred years ago, women were still riding horses sidesaddle, although some bolder femmes were riding astride. The ladies' riding habit changed very little over the years. Certainly the ruff collars women wore in Elizabethan times gave way, however, the close-fitting, durable upper jackets, long sleeves, and laced boots held on. The riding skirt of a lady's habit was streamlined over the years, from a wide culotted affair and petticoats, to the adaptation of trousers. The pant-like style, however, remained hidden by an overskirt that looks very much like the lap rugs formal drivers wear today, such as those worn by Grand Hotel's head coachman.

Riders, both male and female, traditionally wore a tie called a stock tie around their necks, secured by a pin. (By the way, the pin always needs to be fastened securely, horizontally (if need be, at an angle), but never vertically.) The stock could be used to help stop a severe wound on

either person or horse, as the tie is quite long. The pin is removed to secure the bandage. It really works, and one winter, after a branch snagged my horse's leg when foxhunting, I used my stock bandage on him until I got back to the barn. Today in the show rings, people still wear the stock tie, or a modified version, and that's just for harking back to traditional looks, with no real practicality there.

Working Western riders and English would agree that gloves are a must. There are gloves for every occasion and rider, style and composition. Gloves often have non-slip palms to help keep the reins from slipping from the hands. Special features of riding gloves include pimple palms, reinforced rein fingers, and spandex-Lycra inserts for extra flexion. Gloves can be open back, crocheted backed, and even padded. No one is ever truly "dressed" formally on a horse unless he's wearing gloves. In sidesaddle classes, an extra set of string gloves carried in a saddle pouch or on the horse is considered only proper.

In some equine sports, spurs (worn on the back of boots) are mandated. Other classes may require a bowler, derby top hat,

or cowboy hat to be complete. Colors in the English rings tend to be conservative; dark navy blue, forest green, dark gray jackets are all fine. Breeches should be light colored, but unless mandated, rust is still considered to be correct. The emphasis is put on the horse and rider as a discrete working unit in basic hunt classes. In dressage rings, the attire is more formal; often, jackets are lined in red. Cross-country riders and event riders tend toward a wilder informal, individualized look. Riding attire in the stadium and dressage phases of testing still demands the traditional look. Sequins haven't made it into the English circles, although in some Las Vegas events for entertainment sake, they certainly can be found. Even diehard Western riders know that these days, the fancier the chaps, the shirt, the boots, and gloves, the saddle and trimmings, the bigger the score.

When it all comes down to it, nothing beats a good pair of boots, a decent pair of pants that fit, gloves to protect your hands, and a clean shirt.

One last word to those English riders out there: When in doubt, be clean, be conservative, be workmanlike, and remember, "Black is never out of style."

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