

It's All About the Fit

The right sports bra can make all the difference in the saddle

By Jennifer Mellace

OK, ladies, let's talk sports bras. Not the "over the shoulder boulder holders" of the past, but thoughtfully-designed apparel made from functional materials that provide maximum comfort and support where it's needed.

But first, a quick quiz. Were your current bras professionally fitted? Or are you more like the majority of women—myself included—who go to the department store, guess

breast movement and overstretching of delicate connective breast tissue?

"For women of all shapes and sizes, when breasts are poorly supported, they can move up and down and side to side up to three and a half inches per high-impact step, causing discomfort and even damage," says Joy Haizen, managing director for Anita International USA, a leading lingerie and sports-bra manufacturer headquartered in Germany.

portant experience to find the correct sports-bra size," says Haizen.

Women are notoriously poor at determining the correct size for themselves. The most common mistake is choosing bras that are too big in the band and too small in the cup, says Alison O'Neill, owner of the lingerie boutique and bra-fitting specialty store Beneath It All, Somerville, New Jersey (with a winter location at the World Equestrian Center in Ocala, Florida, and a few pop-up shops in Wellington, Florida, during the winter show season).

"Women want to be comfortable and are terrified of back fat," O'Neill says, "so they always buy bras that are too big in the band." Problem is, "the band should provide the overwhelming majority of support." Especially for a high-impact sports bra, "It needs to be firm-fitting—not torture, but comfortably firm. You're going to know it's there."

A rider herself, O'Neill compares a new properly-fitted sports bra to a pair of new tall boots:

"If you buy boots in the exact height you need and they zip up easily, you'll have a problem in a couple weeks. It's the same with a bra. It will take time to break it in. When you remove your bra, there will be some red marks or grooves. This is normal. Whether it's one day old or three months old, this is normal."

On the up side for those with aching shoulder muscles from tight bra straps, O'Neill emphasizes that a well-fitted bra should put minimal pressure on the shoulders.

"Support doesn't come from the straps of the bra. If you crank on the straps, you will get tension in your neck and grooves in your shoulders over time."



READY FOR ACTION: A properly fitted, supportive sports bra is as essential a part of your riding wardrobe as your breeches, boots, and helmet

a size, try on a bunch of bras, and then choose the one that's the most comfortable or that shows the least amount of back fat?

If the latter approach sounds familiar, then consider this your wake-up call. Did you know that wearing a properly fitted, supportive sports bra during high-impact athletic activities (we're looking at you, sitting trot) is crucial, not only for optimal comfort but also for protection against painful

"Wearing a supportive sports bra can actually reduce high-impact breast movement up to 78 percent."

Size Does Matter

When it comes to bras, and sports bras in particular, one size or style most decidedly does not fit all.

"Body volume, breast shape, tissue density, and the spacing of the breasts on a woman's chest wall are some of the reasons why fitting is such an im-

If you can, start with a visit to a specialty lingerie shop. “A professional fitting is so important for proper fit,” says Alison O’Neill, owner of the boutique Beneath It All in Somerville, New Jersey. “One size fits most” in bras just doesn’t work. It’s like breeches: Just because your friend wears brand X breeches doesn’t mean that’s the right brand for you. My best-selling bra might not be for everyone.”

And if there’s no fitter in your area? “The ideal situation is to get fitted in person by a qualified local fitter; however, a secondary option could be to get virtually fitted,” says Anita International USA managing director Joy Haizen. “If neither of these options is available, Anita offers an online fitting guide.” (Many other bra manufacturers and online lingerie specialty retailers do, as well.) Haizen cautions shoppers to use fitting guides (including the one she shared with *USDF Connection*) as a starting point only, stressing that taking measurements isn’t an exact science and that bra styles and sizing vary among manufacturers and even individual models.

DIY fit tips. Start by calculating your band size. While wearing a regular well-fitting bra of any brand, wrap a measuring tape tightly around your ribcage, just below the bustline. Refer to the chart below to convert your underbust measurement to the corresponding band size (expressed in inches in US and UK sizing). For comfort, some women choose a band size that’s an inch or two bigger, but Haizen reminds readers that sports bras intended for high-impact activity must fit fairly tightly to offer proper support.

Next, measure loosely around the widest part of your bust. Subtract your underbust measurement from this number to determine your approximate cup size (the greater the difference, the larger the cup).

“Remember, this might not be 100 percent accurate for everyone,” Haizen says, “as all breasts are different, and you might have to try different sizes.”

Now it’s time to try on some bras! Follow these guidelines from Haizen to help determine whether your selected style and size fits correctly.

- The **band** should be level across the back, parallel to



FROM FLIRTY TO SPORTY: Specialty shops like Beneath It All sell everything from everyday garments and special-occasion lingerie to high-impact sports bras for serious athletes

the floor. A new bra should fit snugly on the loosest or middle row of hooks, and two fingers should fit underneath the band. If the band rides up, try a smaller band size or lengthen the straps.

- The **cups** should be smooth and wrinkle-free. All of your breast tissue should be centered, level, and completely contained within the cup. If you can see breast tissue spilling from the top or bottom or at the underarm of the cup, try going up a cup size. If there is gaping at the top of the cup or wrinkling across the front of the cup, start by checking the band to ensure that it fits snugly on the loosest or middle hooks. You may need to go down a band size, a cup size, or both to eliminate puckering.
- If your breasts are **asymmetrical** (they are, in 90 percent of women), then fit the bra to the larger breast and adjust the strap as needed to better fit the smaller breast.

Remember: In a properly fitted sports bra, the band, not the straps, does the (ahem) heavy lifting.

“The band is the foundation of support,” says Haizen. “Check the sliders on the back straps and/or the position of the front adjustable straps. The straps should be adjusted so the breasts are comfortably lifted and compressed to a secure position that eliminates excessive up-and-down movement. Adjust so you can fit two fingers underneath each strap in order to make sure they are not digging into the shoulder muscles.”

Underbust measurement in inches	26-28	28-30	30-32	32-34	34-36	36-38	38-40	40-42	42-44	44-46
Band size	30	32	34	36	38	40	42	44	46	48

Difference between breast measurement and underbust measurement in inches	3.9-4.7	4.7-5.5	5.5-6.3	6.3-7.1	7.1-7.8	7.8-8.7	8.7-9.5	9.5-10.2	10.2-11.1	11.1-11.8	11.8-12.6	12.6-13.4
Cup size	AA	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K

Anita’s bra measurement and size guide. Chart shows European cup sizing.



DIFFERENT FITS FOR DIFFERENT SHAPES: Besides ribcage and breast size, breast shape, density, and even spacing can affect bra fit

Better Fit, Better Ride

Many dressage riders spend countless hours and money taking lessons and working to improve their equitation. But those same devotees may not realize that wearing an ill-fitting sports bra can actually be a detriment to one's riding.

FEI-level dressage trainer and competitor Lauren Sprieser, who owns Sprieser Sporthorse in Marshall, Virginia, is a longtime believer in the female equestrian's need for a good sports bra.

"As a bigger-busted person, I've always preached the gospel of 'Your bra needs to fit' to women I meet in clinics," says Sprieser, "because I've seen how an unrestrained set of boobs can wreak havoc on a rider's posture, a rider's ability to sit the trot, and more."

Yet even Sprieser discovered that she needed help in finding the right fit. After she met Beneath It All's O'Neill in Wellington, Florida, one winter, the two met for coffee to discuss holding a bra-fitting session at Sprieser's farm. "On my way out the door, she said, 'Hey, by the way, you're in the wrong size bra,'" Sprieser says. "She hadn't seen me ride; she hadn't seen me without a shirt on; she could just tell by a quick glance."

O'Neill encouraged Sprieser to try the same bra in a different size. "It was life-changing. I was instantly more comfortable, and I think more elegant,

in the saddle. As a professional rider I had pretty much always struggled with back pain, but in the different size, my pain went way down.

"The proper fit has really helped me feel like I can stretch tall in the saddle," Sprieser continues. "My previous size had me feeling sufficiently stable, but having my boobs up higher on my body, for lack of a better descriptor, let me feel like I could open my front instead of curling up."

Need Meets Niche

It was her own equestrian passion—coupled with her anatomy—that led O'Neill to her successful business venture.

An episode of the BBC's *Body Image* documentary series entitled "My Big Breasts and Me" caught the attention of the hunter/jumper rider, who is a larger-breasted woman herself. "I was fascinated and learned a lot," says O'Neill, who began researching bra-fitting and found a local expert to give her a proper fitting.

To her surprise, "Finding the correct sports bra changed my riding forever," O'Neill says. "I didn't realize that this would be part of my bra-fitting experience. I rode a horse who would stop [at jumps]. My trainer would say, 'Stop tipping forward.' What I learned after being properly fitted was that I was squeezing in with my elbows to support my bust, which caused me to round my shoulders and tip forward. After wearing a bra that allowed me to hold my shoulders where I didn't feel so vulnerable, most of the stops were eliminated."

The revelations led O'Neill to open her shop in 2012, and today Beneath It All offers high-end lingerie for all occasions as well as, of course, sports bras, all in a wide array of band and cup sizes. O'Neill and her staff fit customers with varying needs, but the store owner maintains a special interest in fitting and educating female equestrians.

"I'm a hunter/jumper person,

but I've had a strong response from dressage riders," she says. "These riders understand that the foundation is what you build from, and you accelerate from there. If you have a weak foundation at the walk, you will have holes in your trot work, too. If you have a bra that doesn't fit, it's impossible for your show coat to be the best fit, as your bust isn't properly supported and likely is not sitting in an optimal position to match the darts of the coat."

Time for a Change?

If you're a woman who spends hours in the saddle, it's important to pay attention to your foundation garments. And keep in mind that bras don't last forever.

"It's important to have a variety of bras and enough bras," says O'Neill. "Wearing a bra for ten hours a day in the heat and your sweat takes a toll. The elastic in bras will wear out."

"I've brought Alison into my farm twice now for fittings," says Sprieser, "and universally, the participants describe the experience as life-changing. I think that, as women—particularly us bustier women—there's a bit of a stigma to really addressing the physical challenges regarding our breasts: that they can truly affect our balance and posture. But if you're putting time and energy into your horse's equipment to allow him to use his body to the best of his ability, there's no reason not to prioritize the same of your own equipment, and a bra truly is equipment in a high-impact sport like riding."



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