

## Show Clothes Splurge or Steal?

**Get the scoop on budget basics, smart upgrades and spare-no-expense, top-of-the-line looks.**

*By HI Staff*

Horse Illustrated June 2008

Whether you are showing on a shoestring or spending your lottery winnings on the circuit, going through the in-gate looking - and feeling - like a winner is the ultimate goal. We talked to industry experts to get advice on putting together a great show wardrobe, no matter what your budget is.

### A Classic Look

You can never go wrong with a classic, conservative look. Traditional styles and colors have longer lifespan that give you a better return on your investments. This is especially true of the pivotal pieces in your show wardrobe.

In the English arena, the general trend is heading back to a more traditional look. "Conservative is better, regardless of price point," advises Patricia Nesto, buyer for Dover Saddlery. "You really can't go wrong with that." While it's nice to splurge on color and fashion, she explains that the classic route, such as a navy hunt coat, or a show shirt in blue, white or a subtle stripe will have more longevity.

Nesto prefers to invest in quality over quantity. "Buy the best one you can, that fits you best, within your budget, in a conservative color that's not going to go out of fashion," she says. Going with a fashion color might be considered a splurge.

In the western show pen, riders have many more color options to coordinate. Suzi Vlietstra of Hobby Horse Clothing Company advises to "plan ahead, use one base color in chaps and blankets, and then choose a secondary accent color to use in your tops."

### Enhancing Your Look

When you are ready to build or expand your show look, you can often enhance it with less expensive items or accent colors.

"One direction and piece that can change a show look is the shirt. Just as in day-to-day life, you can change the look of any show outfit by changing the shirt color," says Nina DePetris of JPC Equestrian. "There are so many colors out there now for shirts, and you can coordinate different colors or patterns for a completely different look in the saddle."

A great show wardrobe requires a little strategic thought. "Have a plan and stick to it, rather than just buying things that catch your eye at the moment," says Vlietstra. "Don't overlook 'experienced' show apparel from eBay or consignment shops. Just like a show saddle, sometimes a used item is a better value, and better quality, than buying new."

### Fit is It

Fit will always trump the latest trend or gotta-have-it label. Poor fit can cancel out even a big-dollar investment of quality fabric and construction.

"I see people [in the show-ring] who buy expensive things that just don't fit them," says Nesto. "It completely defeats the purpose of having the top of the line if it doesn't fit."

With an important item such as a hunt coat, a fit faux pas really stands out. "If a coat is too big or bunched, it detracts from the overall picture very quickly," say Nesto, whose departments include hunt coats and show shirts. When shopping, she advises sitting in a saddle to check fit across the shoulders, in sleeves and length. "Probably the biggest mistake I see is people don't consider enough the importance of fit," she says.

Vlietstra agrees. "Make sure your clothes fit you properly - trim and smooth," she says. "Wrinkles are never in style!"

A common problem Dover Saddlery buyer Amy Hamlet sees is poorly fitting helmets in the show-ring. "It is very important to try the helmet on with your hair up, the way you are going to have it in the show-ring. That can make a difference in what size fits you correctly," she advises.

Western riders should also ensure their hat fits and is shaped properly.

#### Quality is the Big Ticket

A splurge is definitely worthwhile on key wardrobe elements. For the western rider, chaps would be on the list. "You must have great chaps because they cover half your body, and you really can't shortchange them," says Vlietstra. "Next, buy a quality hat and coordinating saddle blanket. You will 'fill in the blanks' with different tops as you can afford them."

Quality show apparel, like good tack, has excellent resale value, so it really pays to educate yourself before you plunk down money on junk, says Vlietstra.

To assess quality, look at the weight and weave of the fabric, how it feels, and the construction of the garment.

"Turn garments inside-out and look at the construction - they should look as finished on the inside as they do on the outside, and the quality should always be at least comparable to better department store brands," advises Vlietstra. "You usually get what you pay for, and I always advise people to invest in the best within their budget."

#### Upgrade Smarter

Technological fabrics will up the price point a bit. However, you may be very glad you splurged on the shirt or breeches with the moisture-wicking, breathable fabric on a hot, humid day - what price comfort, and that cool, calm, collected look as you start your round? Priceless.

Custom items can also be cost-effective splurges. Factor in the expense of tailoring an off-the-rack item, and the dollars and cents just might add up in your favor. If you are hard to fit and custom is a necessary route, as is often the case for English riders when it comes to tall boots, Cyndy Miller, a buyer for Dover Saddlery, offers this advice to keep costs down. "When purchasing custom boots, staying with the basic custom boot and standard leather will assist with the budget - upgrading leather, adding zippers, et cetera, all lead to an increased price tag," she says.

#### Mistakes to Avoid

Going too trendy is a common mistake in the conservative English arena, especially when you are starting out in the beginner ranks. A flashy or very fashion-forward look stands out in traditional sports like hunters, equitation and dressage. Be sure your riding is up to that level of attention, especially from the judge.

"Unless you're really good, it's not your clothes that should be making a statement! You have to be very sure of yourself to pull off those looks," says Nesto. "You can't go wrong with the classics," she emphasizes. "If anyone is ever in doubt, you cannot go wrong with a dark coat and light shirt."

While color and glitz are encouraged in the western show pen, Vlietstra sees a few pitfalls there as well. Among them are buying things that may be trendy but not comfortable; buying more than you need to start; and buying things that don't fit you now. "You may intend to lose weight, but if you don't, your clothes will look and feel too tight."

With a little thought and some strategic shopping, you can shop like a champ to put together a winning show wardrobe.