

BEAUTIFUL BLING

Want to stand out from the crowd? Here's how to be stylin' in the show ring without overdoing it.

by Karen Briggs

Classic, elegant, timeless -- these are the hallmarks of the hunter/jumper ring. Traditionally, show turnout has always been about keeping it conservative so as not to detract from the natural beauty of the horse. But ever so gradually, something new has been inching its way into the show ring: bling! If you're hankering for a little individuality and style in your look, you're no longer limited to a plain navy hunt coat and khaki breeches. You can express yourself with some sparkle, a hint of bold color, or perhaps a touch of silver filigree. It's all in the details.

Tessa Gillespie, owner/manager of Granite Bay Saddlery, a mobile tack shop based in the Los Angeles area, says there are lots of ways to bling out your turn-out. Among her favorites are show shirts adorned with Swarovski crystals on the collar or cuffs, such as the "Wellington" shirts by Charles Owen or the Pale Horse models with a subtle line of crystal D-ring bits on the choker. Shirt colors, too, are getting much brighter than in the past, she says – think raspberry, turquoise, hot pink, coral, or perhaps pistachio!

Hunt coats in wild colors and contrasts, such as French blue, steel grey with a purple plaid pattern, navy with windowpane stripes of pink and apple green, or chocolate brown with wide pink and white stripes, are also flying off the shelves. "The coats tend to have brightly-colored linings, as well," she says. "They're really loud, but beautiful! You can also get piped collars, and velvet collars are coming back too." Many riders choose a coat with a pattern and then match it up with a solid-colored shirt which goes with the jacket lining.

"On the whole I think you have to ride very well to pull off the bolder looks," Gillespie adds. "You don't want to attract the wrong kind of attention if you're a bit of a novice – but if you're really good, you can make it work."

Even breeches are starting to make a bit of a statement in the show ring. How about a pair of Ariat All Circuits with a subtle line of contrasting piping down the outer seam? The favored shade is still khaki green, but other hues of sand, beige, fawn, or even creamy café au lait are starting to find favor with riders and judges. Gillespie says she's even seen breeches with pink or navy knee patches – invisible when in the saddle, but a fun fashion statement when walking around the show grounds.

Boots may still be basic black – "an oasis of calm", says Gillespie – but these days, spurs are one of the most popular places to add some bling. A line of Swarovski crystals, clear or colored, are a fabulous way to dress up your lower leg, and you can make the look even fancier with a leather spur strap complete with a Western-inspired silver buckle. Some riders prefer spurs with silver engraving along the outside branch, or you can get stirrup irons adorned with silver, crystals – or

both!

Tabitha Knaub, general manager of Dominion Saddlery in Burbank, California, says that after its initial splash, bling is becoming more subtle again, as befits the hunter ring. “The fancy spurs are still popular,” she observes, “but I think the smaller crystals, or just a bit of engraving, are winning out over the louder designs.” She does find there’s a steady demand for stirrup irons with small silver overlays in a floral design, such as the ones from MDC (www.mdccorporation.us), and says the silver on black powder-coated stirrups are particularly striking on a jumper.

How else can you bling? Try a rhinestone-studded browband, such as the ones from Otto Schumaker, for a luxe touch. “The chain and clincher browbands have almost disappeared in favor of the crystal ones,” says Knaub. “They’re still more appropriate for jumpers than for hunters, though, I think.” Ear-nets are another option for the jumpers – they now come in dozens of colors, with metallic threads or rhinestone accents. (Granite Bay Saddlery makes up custom ear-nets with colored stones, in your choice of stable colors, for about \$40.). Or you can outfit yourself with a pair of gloves with a line of crystals across the back of the hand (SSG Gloves’s “Bling” glove is one brand).

Interestingly, helmets are becoming more conservative again, say both Knaub and Gillespie. “I don’t get asked for the helmet striping kits much anymore,” says Knaub. “Stickers and stripes are still popular for schooling helmets, especially with the kids, but the look in the show ring is veering back towards basic black or charcoal grey GPA-style (helmets).” Gillespie agrees, “In the past few months I’ve seen people taking all the bling off their helmets. The judges are saying it’s too much.”

Says Knaub, “It’s important never to detract from the horse. Get what fits you well and coordinates with your horse’s color, and then add bling as an accent, not the main event.”

With so many options out there, how do you choose the best way to bring up the bling a bit ... without going over the top? Up-and-coming trainer Sandrine Seifert, of D&D Stables (based at The Paddock Riding Club in Los Angeles) has a handle on it all. “I used to work in the fashion industry,” she confesses, “and I still like to keep up with the latest!

“My kids love all the blitz, but I don’t allow them to wear it all at the same time,” Seifert says. “It’s okay at home, but in the show ring, less is really more. I still like to see (my riders) looking classic, elegant, and traditional. Obviously there’s more leeway in the jumper world, where the breeches with the contrasting piping, or even rust breeches, which are starting to make a comeback, can be nice. I do like the spurs with the little rhinestones on the side, or the engraving, which is pretty. It adds a little elegance without being too bling-y.”

Seifert draws the line, however, at rhinestone-encrusted stirrup irons. “I find them a little tacky!”, she says.

So how does she like to express herself? With secret bling! “I love to add little details that might

not be visible to a judge in the ring, but stand out when I'm just walking around the show grounds," she says. "Sparkly belts are the most fun. You can do rhinestones and fancy belt buckles, to match your ratcatcher shirt. Personally, I'm big on pink, and since my kids take a lot of fashion cues from me we tend to be a very pink barn.

"I'm not keen on the louder patterned jackets, but I like the bolder linings if you want to make a bit more of a statement. You can have a lot of fun with the linings. Again, it's invisible to the judge so you still look traditional and correct in the ring.

"On the whole, even in the jumper ring, too much bling is frowned upon at the A or AA rated shows. Fads and trends don't stay around too long, so I still recommend going with the classic essentials. Then you can add a belt or a sparkly spur and you didn't spend thousands of dollars on something you won't be able to wear a year from now."

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