

‘It’s a life choice’

When we accompanied two trained hat fitters to an international show to find out whose hat fits and whose doesn't, the results were frightening, as Sarah Jenkins reveals



The team in action from top to bottom: Tina Rogers, British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) field officer fits a back strap on Isobel Picton-Turville; H&H showjumping editor Jennifer Donald, left, quizzes Gemma Plumley; flyers in the lorry park at Royal Windsor; Tricia Nassau Williams, BETA field officer and trainer inspects Carly Woodgate's hat



“Your hat can only do a good job if it’s in the right place when you hit the deck”

Tricia Nassau Williams
BETA field officer and trainer

If you’re going to bother wearing a parachute to jump out of a plane, you might as well be confident it’s going to (a) stay on your back and (b) open before you land.

“A piece of safety equipment can only do its job if fitted correctly,” points out Tricia Nassau Williams, field officer and trainer at the British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA).

Yet when *Horse & Hound* accompanied Tricia and her colleague Tina Rogers to survey riders who were competing at Royal Windsor on 12 May, we discovered that a frightening number were competing in hats that didn’t actually fit them correctly – and therefore provided limited protection.

An unimpressive 43% of hats didn’t fit the riders’ heads, while a whopping 83% didn’t have the straps tightened up correctly. The results of our survey can be found opposite, but here is what the riders had to say.

When is a size seven not a size seven?

BUYING a hat is a bit like looking for a pair of jeans on Oxford Street – a size 28 in one store may fit you a darn sight better than a 28 in the next. Our anatomies are unique and that includes our heads.

One rider interviewed, Jenny Brown, 34, from Leicestershire, told *H&H*: “It’s hard because the hats are all pretty standard sizes and if your head is something in-between it’s difficult to find one that fits.”

Tricia said that Jenny’s hat felt quite snug, but had too much movement from side to side. Hers was a common problem – Jenny has a slim head.

A size “seven” riding hat, for example, denotes the circumference of the inside of the hat, but some are more circular, for example, and others more oblong.

“You just have to try several makes until you find out what works for you,” says Tina. ➤

Bumble Thomas
takes a nasty fall
at the water at
Badminton 2005



Top tips when choosing a hat

- ▶ If a particular style you want doesn't fit, give up and try a different model or brand.
- ▶ A well-fitted hat should be as close a fit as possible without being uncomfortably tight. If you feel unsure, then hat-fitter Tricia Nassau Williams suggests asking to sit in the store wearing it for half an hour to be sure.
- ▶ Something as simple as a new hairstyle, or wearing glasses, can alter the fit of your riding hat. Always try a new hat on with your hair and glasses as they would be when riding.
- ▶ Remember that children's heads keep growing.
- ▶ Different hats are designed for different disciplines — choose one appropriate for your riding activities.
- ▶ Different hat manufacturers cater for different shaped heads — don't assume that a new hat will fit because it is the same size as your old one.
- ▶ It is not recommended that hair clips or slides be worn beneath your riding hat.

HAT STATS

93 the number of riders approached. Less than a third — 30 — agreed to take part in our survey to find out how well their hat fits

1 the only rider who approached us when they saw the work we were doing to ask whether they could have their hat assessed

87% of riders interviewed thought their hats fitted

57% of hats assessed did actually fit (a 30% discrepancy between what riders felt and what experts said)

83% of hats assessed had straps that were too loose and would not have held the hat in place in the event of a fall

2 hats assessed would have benefited from fitting strips. These perfect a hat that already fits, they don't make a badly fitting hat fit

30% of hats assessed were originally fitted by an expert. Of those, half didn't fit any more

4 the number of riders who agreed to be interviewed who didn't think their hats fitted

Our BETA experts were surprised by how many of the hats actually fitted — which belied their normal experience. Some riders we approached for interview admitted they knew their hat didn't fit and didn't want to appear in *H&H* with an ill-fitting hat. Many thanks to all those who were willing guinea pigs.



John Crippen decided to invest in a new hat following his fitting assessment

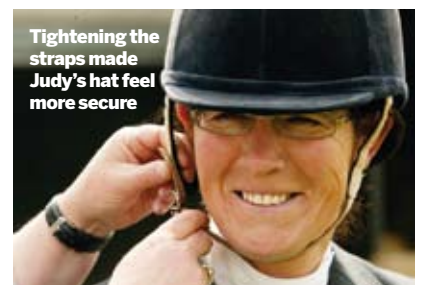
WHEN IS A HAT OBSOLETE?

SHOWJUMPER John Crippen, 25, from Chesham, Bucks, admitted that his hat probably didn't fit him any more. He'd had the hat for a year but, riding 12 horses a day, it was very battered. John estimated that he'd fallen off about 10 times in it.

Expert Tricia said of John's hat: "This hat is showing what appears to be a lot of damage, please replace it as it has done its job!"

"A horse has trod on it and it gets dropped a lot," John explained. "I usually wear it much higher on my head. It feels weird now the harness has been tightened."

John bought a new hat at Windsor and donated his old hat to be examined for damage. Roy Burek, managing director of Charles Owen, later reported: "This rider was lucky that all the impacts were on different parts of the head. Each time the helmet has been damaged the protection potential has been significantly reduced."



Tightening the straps made Judy's hat feel more secure

RIDING WITH GLASSES

"It probably fitted when I bought it, but it's a little loose now," said Judy Piper-Dadswell, 44, showjumping at Windsor. "It's very comfy!"

"I've had this for five years. I've not fallen on my head in it — I got rid of the hat I was wearing when I fell on my head."

Tricia said: "If you ride with glasses like Judy, you need to have your hat fitted while wearing them."

She found that Judy's hat fitted a little low — on top of her eyebrows — and that there were gaps at the sides.

"I think the padding has given a bit. It is too loose; I know I need to replace it," said Judy. "It feels more secure now the straps are done up, though."

Laura Gaukroger has an asymmetrical head which makes hat fitting a challenge



IRREGULAR-SHAPED HEAD PROBLEMS

SHOWJUMPER Laura Gaukroger, 25, who works for Judy Piper-Dadswell, said: "I bought this hat last summer from the PROtector stand because I'd heard they were meant to be one of the safest hats you could get. It feels a bit less padded out now than when it was correctly fitted initially."

Tricia said: "The hat is a bit loose. I can fit my thumb up the back of it — you should only be able to fit a fingertip — and there's movement front to back."

Laura admitted: "It has started to tip forward when I jump big fences, though feels tighter now you've done the straps up properly."

Tricia sums up: "Laura's head is slimmer on one side than the other, which makes it difficult for her to get a good fit. If your head is a unique shape, you can get hats fitted to a template of your head — at a cost."

HATS AND HAIRBANDS

LEANNE COX, 21, was showjumping at Windsor in the H&H Foxhunter. She wore a Charles Owen Wellington Classic hat.

Expert Tina Rogers asked whether Leanne always wore a headband under her hat, as this would affect the fit. A hat should be fitted with or without hair accessories depending on what is the norm.

"Your headband, even a thin one like that, will make a difference to the fit of the hat," she said. "But even with the headband, your hat is too loose — it rocks."

Leanne admitted: "I should wear my other hat more really — it fits better. This one is in the smallest size I could find in this make — I've got a small head."

"It was more snug when I bought it, it's given a bit."

Leanne also felt uncomfortable when her harness straps were tightened. "It feels like I can't move my face," she said. "I'll get used to it, I suppose."

'Your hat rocks,' but that wasn't a compliment to Leanne Cox



Wedded to that bun: Anne Nelson's hairstyle keeps her hat in place



...AND HAIRSTYLES

ANNE NELSON, who was also showjumping at Windsor, was aware her hat is a little loose, but anchors it by putting her hair in a net and bun and securing this within the harness gap at the back.

"Without the bun, there is too much movement in the hat from front to back," said expert Tricia. "If you were buying a new hat, you'd want it more snug."

To which Anne pointed out: "I wouldn't be able to put my hair up in it then, would I!"

Anne also admitted to having fallen off in this hat about a week after she'd bought it 18 months ago. Our BETA experts explained that if the hat received an impact, it would no longer be able to absorb another impact to the same point. We know we should replace our hats when we've fallen on them, but how many riders actually do? It's another expense to an already pricey hobby, but as Tricia pointed out: "What price safety?"

» Former jockey Anthony Burks, 22, who was showing coloureds at Windsor, said: "I found my crash hat was pinching the front of my head, so when I bought my current show hat last week I went for the bigger size."

As a result, Anthony now has a loose hat, which is too gappy at the sides.

Growing heads

BY contrast, some of the younger riders at the show, including Carly Woodgate, 18, who contested the junior riding test, said their hats felt a tad tight sometimes.

Tricia explained that: "Although you want the hat to be a firm fit, you shouldn't be uncomfortable in it."

Being told by the vendor "It'll give", can be as misleading as the leather boot myth — they always pinch and a year later it's still agony to walk a course in them.

Carly has had her hat for three years, so her head may well have grown in that time.

Riding test competitor Samantha Holland, 36, said: "My hat was a snug fit when I used to have really long hair and is much looser now I've had it cut — I wouldn't have thought that would make so much difference."

Jo Bates, 47, was competing in the four-year-old hunter classes — hence, she explained, she was wearing a "proper" hat and was "sure it fitted". She'd bought her GPA six months ago to replace a hat that had worn loose.

But we came across few riders as conscientious as Jo about their headgear.

"It's a life choice," Tricia conceded to riders time and time again.

It must do the job

SOME smoke, some drink, some go hunting in beagles, some jump in baseball caps. Like it or not, there's kudos to all these practices — one that children are keen to emulate. And there's comfort, too — until you hit the deck that is. But if you are going to bother sticking safety gear on your head, it has to do the job, so you might as well make sure it fits — and tighten up the straps. **H&H**

What we found

Hat research — Wednesday, 12 May

OUR sample size was not large. Thirty riders' details only give us an insight into the hat-wearing habits of competition riders. The riders interviewed at Royal Windsor were showjumping, showing, contesting riding tests or mounted games — so we cannot assume the outcome would be the same if this survey was completed at a three-day event, for example. It is enough to give us food for thought — even if you think your hat fits, there's a chance it doesn't. It's unlikely, on the basis of these findings, that your hat straps are correctly fitted in order to make the hat effective should you fall. And even if you had your hat fitted by an expert, it's possible it no longer fits — or never did.

COMING NEXT WEEK: How to check whether your hat fits properly; the simple precaution 83% of those tested ignored; the science behind the safety; tips on buying the perfect hat.