

Best Performance in a Supporting Role

Full support sports bras take center stage

By Candace Karu

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Plato, and then a couple of thousand years later, Frank Zappa, posited that necessity is the mother of invention. By 1977 the growing number of female athletes created the need for a new kind of bra. Enter that legendary mother and her two running daughters, Hinda Miller and Lisa Lindahl. That year they created the first sports bra by sewing a couple of jockstraps together, marketing their creation as the Jogbra. This invention revolutionized the women's sports apparel industry. However, while this over-the-head, nonadjustable type of compression bra is perfect for most runners who wear an A or B cup, it is practically useless for larger-breasted athletes during high impact activity.

At every race, on every road there are women runners who wear a C cup or larger. Some of them will be wearing two bras in order to get sufficient support and control. On the hottest summer days, many full-figured runners are hiding the bra equivalent of granny-panties, large, unflattering corset-like brassieres, under T-shirts while their smaller sisters gambol in colorful, fashionable bras and shimmels. For larger breasted runners, a well-constructed, supportive and adjustable running bra is as important a piece of running equipment as a good pair of shoes. Is wishing for a sports bra that is also great looking too much to ask?

Many full-figured runners spend hundreds of dollars in pursuit of "The Bra," the perfect foundation garment that will support and control without crushing ribs or smashing breasts flat. While they dream of the kind of selection smaller-breasted runners take for granted, coveting choices in color, pattern, and styles, they live with the reality of their limited black and white standbys. Runners with larger breasts have benefited from advances in bra technology and construction, but they also embrace elegant design and sportive styling in the more advanced gear.

Alpha-sized bras (S, M, L, XL) may be perfectly adequate for an A or B cup, but pity the runner with a lean physique and a large cup size. That configuration might well translate into a 32D, represented by one of our testers, a size that until recently was mostly the stuff of sports bra legend. Lately larger-breasted runners, even those with very small frames, have found a growing selection of sports bras designed specifically for high-impact activities like distance running that come in C cups and larger, with band sizes as low as 32 and as high as 44.

On the following pages we feature eight bras road-tested and rated by a panel of C and D cup runners. All the bras tested use standard cup sizing to help ensure proper fit. This is by no means a comprehensive guide, merely a sampling for larger-breasted runners who are searching for a great running bra.

1) Champion Double Dry Seamless Full Support Underwire: \$40

32-34 B/C – 38-40 D/DD

www.championcatalog.com

The consensus among testers is that this bra looked and felt like a real piece of running gear and not lingerie. They agreed that this bra could be worn without a shirt in hot weather and still afford adequate coverage. The feel of the fabric was a plus, as was its outstanding moisture-wicking capabilities. In addition to an absence of seams, the soft, wide rib band and the triple-padded underwire dramatically reduced the potential for chafing. The Double Dry Seamless was a top pick for all our testers.

2) Enell Sports Bra: \$60

32C and up (custom sizes can be ordered)

www.enell.com

Enell is a company that makes only one product, a sports bra for large-breasted women that has been declared one of Oprah's "favorite things." This bra is both intimidating and extremely effective. Its front hook and eye closure and unique design creates a fit that is tight to the point of breathlessness, but eliminates virtually all motion. The Enell motto is "the bounce stops here," and they mean what they say. Our C cup testers thought the Enell was overkill for their needs, but all would definitely recommend this bra to their larger-breasted running friends. Moisture control was a problem for our testers. In spite of the fact that Enell is made with a technical fabric called Naturexx, its wicking ability was limited at best.

3) Nike Revolutionary Support Bra: \$70

34B – 38D

www.nikerunning.com

Six years of research and four patent-pending technologies have gone into the development of Nike's most



1) Champion Double Dry Seamless Full Support Underwire
2) Enell Sports Bra

Image by Peter Baker

innovative sports bra. This bra not only adjusts in the back and straps, but also in the front, creating custom-sized encapsulation for each breast. Our testers objected to the complexity of the adjustment process, and felt that, in the end, this bra did not offer adequate support or motion control. Testers were split down the middle on the styling, with descriptions ranging from “totally cool” to “an S&M bondage device.” At \$70, this is the most expensive bra of the bunch by a wide margin.

4) Moving Comfort Maia: \$44

32C – 44DD

www.movingcomfort.com

Most testers loved this bra once they got the proper fit, which often bore no relationship to their usual size. Try this one before you buy; our testers found they often had to wear a full cup size smaller than normal. Once properly fitted, however, the Maia got high marks for motion control and support. Its higher neckline is both flattering and modest, and the wide straps enhance fit and comfort. However, the fact that the straps are not adjustable lessens the likelihood of having it fit perfectly.

5) Champion Action Shape: \$38

32-34 C/D – 42-44 D/DD

www.championcatalog.com

A nod of recognition goes to Champion for having the widest selection of bras for all runners but especially those with larger breasts. Most of our testers had some experience with this sports bra standby, which was one of the first bras developed specifically for larger-breasted athletes. The Action Shape was praised for its excellent fit and motion control, but scored lower on the cotton/Lycra fabric that does not effectively wick moisture. “When it gets wet, it stays wet,” said one ultramarathoner. At \$38, this is the most reasonably priced bra of the group we tested.

6) Adidas Active Intimates Underwire Bra: \$40

32B – 34DD

www.shopadidas.com

Though testers liked the fit and feel of this bra, all agreed that the adidas Active Intimates Underwire did not offer enough support and motion control for distance running. It also looked more like an everyday bra than a sports bra. The consensus was that this bra would work well for lower impact activities like biking or yoga. “It felt great on, until I started to run,” said one tester.

7) Champion Double Dry Distance Underwire: \$39

34-36 C/D – 40-42 D/DD

www.championcatalog.com

This extremely flattering, extremely supportive bra elicited superlatives from all who tested it. It produced a very natural looking shape while offering excellent coverage and fit. The brushed technical fabric lining made it the softest of all the bras tested and virtually eliminated chafing. Extra padding made the underwires almost undetectable. The adjustable V-back kept strap slippage to a minimum. “Adjustable straps would have made this the perfect bra,” reported one tester. Including the smallest band size (32) in the size range was another suggestion.

8) Moving Comfort Fiona: \$44

32C – 44DD

www.movingcomfort.com

The Moving Comfort Fiona garnered raves from all testers. It received almost perfect scores across the board for fit, support, styling, and chafe-free wear. It is one of the bras that our testers agreed could be worn without a shirt, supplying sufficient coverage and fashionable styling. The wider, adjustable straps and superb wicking ability of the fabric are two standout characteristics of this bra.

Why and How

Breasts need protection, both for comfort and long-term support. Because the support system they come by naturally, tiny Cooper’s ligaments and a bit of skin, is delicate and fragile, breasts are at risk during high-impact activity. Without a well-designed sports bra to reduce the natural motion running produces, larger breasted runners can experience pain, and worse, permanent, irreversible stretching and sagging. This kind of damage can be virtually eliminated by wearing a well-constructed, properly fitting sports bra.

There are two basic types of sports bras — compression and encapsulation. A compression bra holds breast tissue close to the body and is responsible for the famous “mono-boob” look. Encapsulation bras have two distinct cups that produce a more natural-looking shape; some have underwire for added support. These bras often fasten in the back with hooks or snaps. Some sports bras incorporate both compression and encapsulation, offering maximum support.

Most of the bras tested for this review combine compression and encapsulation in their design.

Chafing can be an issue with any size running bra. Avoid features like scratchy sizing tags, exposed seams, non-wicking fabric, and armholes that are too tight. These are common sources of potential problems on longer runs. Bras constructed with technical fabrics that wick and control moisture help reduce chafing and discomfort.



3) Nike Revolutionary Support Bra
4) Moving Comfort Maia



5) Champion Action Shape
6) Adidas Active Intimates Underwire Bra

A guide to finding your correct bra size

For larger-breasted runners, proper fit is essential. Sizes vary from company to company so a 34D from one manufacturer may fit very differently from a similarly sized bra from another. Weight gain or loss, change in fitness level, and pregnancy are among the many reasons bra size may change from year to year. Be sure to try any sports bra before making a purchase.

When measuring for your correct bra size, you should wear a comfortable, everyday bra. It is helpful to have a friend or professional fitter help you to make sure your measurements are accurate. Use a soft measuring tape and measure the circumference of your rib cage just below your breasts.

If the circumference is an even number, add 4 inches, if its an odd number, add 5 inches. For example, if the measurement is 29 inches, you would add 5 inches and your bra size is 34. If the measurement is 30 inches, your bra size is 34.

Next, measure the circumference at the fullest part of your bust to determine cup size. If the circumference is the same as your bra size, your cup size is an AA.

- 1 inch more is a cup size A
- 2 inches more is a cup size B
- 3 inches more is a cup size C
- 4 inches more is a cup size D
- 5 inches more is a cup size DD

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