

PONY POWER

In a super-sized world,
bigger isn't always better

BY KELLY SANCHEZ



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PONY RIDER CHAMPION: Allison Cyprus on Maple Lane Kero at the
2011 USEF Dressage Festival of Champions (NJ)

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“**W**anted: Super mover with great show presence, a fantastic temperament, and a trot that’s easy to sit.”

Impossible, you say? For a growing number of dressage riders, those qualities can all be found in a compact package: a sport pony.

Melissa Mulchahey is one adult amateur who has jumped into the world of dressage ponies with both feet. Though she rode hunter ponies as a kid and later did eventing, she believed that only full-sized warmbloods could succeed in the dressage arena. She owned a string of German-breds, including a mare with whom she won several national and regional awards.

“At that point, I was 47 years old, with a bad back and a bad neck due to riding injuries. I seriously needed to reconsider my selection of horses,” Mulchahey says.

At five feet four and a half, she says, “my legs barely cleared the saddle pad, and it was hard for me to effectively communicate a half-halt.” Tired of riding horses that were too big, too bouncy, and at times too scary, Mulchahey reassessed her choice of mounts.

“I had fallen victim to the ‘bigger is better’ syndrome and was under the misconception that I wouldn’t score well or be taken seriously as a rider if I wasn’t on a seventeen-hand horse,” Mulchahey explains. “But just because a tall professional rider looks lovely, elegant, and appropriate on a 17.2-hand horse didn’t mean that short-legged, short-upper-bodied me looked the same.”

Mulchahey made the switch to ponies and hasn’t looked back. Not only did she have more fun; once she began competing on mounts that better suited her size, she started racking up scores in the high 60s and 70s. She and her Westfalen pony gelding Outrageous, whom she purchased at the Westfalen Elite Auction in Germany, won the 2011 California Dressage Society Four-Year-Old Futurity with a score of 68.575 percent.

“My ponies are very comfortable. There’s none of that quick, choppy ‘pony movement.’ The cadence, the comfort, and the softness in the back feel like a horse. And I’m not afraid to put the pedal down and ride them forward,” Mulchahey says.

The owner of RoseLane Sporthorses and Ponies in Livermore, CA, Mulchahey travels regularly to Germany to look at prospects. She now owns seven Westfalen ponies—including Golden State (on this month’s cover), who won the three-year-old pony-stallion division at the 2012 *Bundeschampionate* in Warendorf. With his score of 9.56, the 2009 licensed premium Westfalen pony (FS Golden Moonlight – Donchester) set a record at the prestigious competition; and Mulchahey became the first American owner to win there.



RIGHT-SIZED: Sport-pony enthusiast Melissa Mulchahey and her Westfalen pony gelding Outrageous

Filling a Niche for Adults

Fern Feldman, of Cheshire, CT, is another adult rider who believes that ponies are perfect for petite women as well as for youth. A longtime USDF Region 8 director, Feldman trained for years with Olympian and Dressage4Kids founder Lendon Gray, Bedford, NY, perhaps the most prominent sport-pony proponent in the country. With her nineteen-year-old French Connemara pony Fidelio III, Feldman has achieved her dream of earning her USDF gold medal.

“Ponies give people more options,” says Feldman, 69. “Most of us know we’re not going to the Olympics, but the ponies offer us the ability to have a great time and to improve. I only wish there were more trained ponies for adult amateurs.”

The petite Feldman, who now trains with Jessica Rizzi in North Salem, NY, calls “Deli’s” temperament “incredible. He’s never going to get a nine on gaits, but if I had a fancy warmblood with the big trot, I don’t think I could ride it. It’s nice to be able to sit the trot and stop and go when I want.”

The Youth Factor

To date, ponies in the US are typically found in the hunter ring. In contrast, there’s a rich tradition in Europe of children eventing, jumping, and riding dressage on well-trained ponies. Witness the annual *Fédération Equestre Interna-*



PINT-SIZED PIONEER: *The Connemara-Thoroughbred gelding Seldom Seen, ridden by Lendon Gray, was the first successful Grand Prix-level dressage pony in the US*

tionale (FEI) European Pony Championships, which draw young competitors from Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and beyond to compete in the three Olympic equestrian disciplines.

"The FEI Pony scene in Europe is hotly contested, with champion ponies easily selling in the six-figure range," Mul-

chahey notes. "There, you start as an FEI pony rider, work your way to FEI Juniors, then FEI Young Riders, then on to the adult FEI classes."

Gray, who helped launch the US Equestrian Federation National Pony Rider Dressage Championships in 2011, is doing her part to promote dressage and ponies for American kids. "The Europeans have embraced the fact that if you start a child riding good ponies—and 'good' as in trained—they're going to progress more rapidly," she says.

The pony system certainly worked for Isabelle Leibler, 17, of Greenwich, CT. Under Gray's tutelage, she brought her pony Get the Picture up to the FEI Pony tests and later competed her German Riding Ponies Going West and Depardieu in Europe.

"Isabelle started with me at age five and then did the FEI Ponies very seriously," Gray says. "At seventeen, she skipped Juniors entirely and went directly to Young Riders. She'll tell you the ponies really taught her to ride."

Restricted to riders aged twelve to sixteen, the FEI Pony tests may be for small equines, but they're full of big challenges: trot half-passes, counter-canter, and collected and extended paces.

"The USEF lists them as equivalent to Second Level, but I think they're more like a hard Third Level test without flying

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changes,” says USEF “S” judge Margaret Freeman, of Tryon, NC. “The combinations of the movements require the rider to really use their brain and set up the pony for what comes next. There is no ‘down’ time anywhere. The rider must be well-prepared and confident—traits that will help her with challenges that lie ahead as she moves up the levels.”

What’s a Pony, Anyway?

The FEI defines a pony as “a small horse” whose height at the withers does not exceed 148 centimeters without shoes (or 149 centimeters shod), or approximately 14.2 hands.

But “oversize ponies” (in the 14.3- to 15.3-hand range) are popular both in the dressage ring and for breeding. The 14.3½-hand Welsh Cob stallion North Forks Cardi currently competes at Grand Prix with trainer/co-owner Jessica Wisdom of Oregon.

For many, it was Gray and her Connemara-Thoroughbred gelding Seldom Seen who laid the groundwork for diminutive mounts in competitive dressage. Together they earned multiple USDF Horse of the Year titles and swept the Grand Prix classes at Dressage at Devon (PA). Seldom Seen was inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame in 2005.

“No longer is it unheard of to have a pony,” says Gray.

“We’re seeing ponies competing successfully at the FEI levels all over the country with adults.”

Although ponies aren’t allowed to compete in FEI dressage competitions (CDIs) other than in FEI Pony classes (except for CDI-Ps, which are FEI Pony competitions), they’re permitted in USEF-licensed/USDF-recognized dressage competitions through Grand Prix or in designated pony classes or divisions.

And what of the reputation of the “naughty pony”? Unfounded, says Gray. “So many of us grew up with ponies that weren’t trained. Is there a difference in temperament when you go from 14.3 [horse minimum height] to 14.2 [pony maximum height]? No, but you’re much more likely to plop a rider on an untrained pony than on an untrained horse. A pony that’s obnoxious is ‘cute’; a seventeen-hand horse that’s obnoxious is unsafe.”

Best-Known Sport-Pony Breeds

When enthusiasts discuss sport ponies, many are referring to the breeds collectively known as the German Riding Pony. Top individuals possess the uphill movement, ground-covering paces, elasticity, and impulsion of a full-sized horse, combined with the intelligence and personality ponies are known for. Standing between 13.2 and 14.2 hands, the ideal

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SMALL BUT MIGHTY: *The pony stallion Highlife's Burberry, owned by Whispered Wish Weser-Ems (FL)*

German Riding Pony has a well-defined head, a well-proportioned neck, and harmonious conformation.

Welsh ponies had a strong influence on the German Riding Pony; and New Forest, Arabian, English Thoroughbred, and warmblood bloodlines have been infused as well. For her part, Mulchahey primarily buys and breeds within the Champion de Luxe, FS Don't Worry, and Golden bloodlines, which she says "consistently produce talented ponies with excellent gaits and ridability."

The 14.2-hand Weser-Ems stallion Chardonnay (by the prolific Welsh B pony stallion Constantin), imported by Marta Kauffman and trained to Grand Prix level by Los Angeles-based trainer/rider Jaye Cherry, "has better gaits than most horses; he's exceptional," says Cherry.

The winner of the 2008 East Coast Pony Cup, the 14.2-hand Westfalen pony stallion Popeye (FS Pour l'Amour – SPS Nice Touch) is currently standing at stud at Maryland's Hilltop Farm.

With rider Nancy Hinz, the 14.1-hand Welsh Cob Kentchurch Chime (Parc Commando – Llanath Rhuddel) competed successfully at Grand Prix after a career in combined driving.

Hinz met the then nine-year-old palomino stallion while working for his owner, Mary Alice Williams. "I liked his

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movement and work ethic, so I said, 'Just for fun, let's see what he can do.' Mary Alice thought it would be so exciting if he got to Fourth Level," Hinz says.

The pair competed on the Florida circuit when Chime was seventeen, earning raves for their Grand Prix Freestyle. "He received eights for extended trot and extended canter," Hinz recalls.

Today Hinz works with several ponies at her Yellow Rose Dressage in Montgomery, TX. Student Allison Cyprus and her perlino Welsh Cob gelding Maple Lane Kero won the 2011 National Pony Rider Championship; and Cyprus's mother, Kristin, won the 2011 Great American/USDF First Level adult-amateur championship with her Welsh Cob Madoc Gareth.

Made in America

Heather Luing is one of a small but determined group of US breeders intent on establishing a foothold for sport ponies on this side of the Atlantic. At her Whispered Wish Weser-Ems in Ocala, FL, she stands Highlife's Burberry (Bodyguard – Conda), who in 2009 became the first American-bred Weser-Ems pony to be licensed as a breeding stallion. At his 30-day testing, Highlife's Burberry became the highest-scoring stallion in the US to date.

Short Quotes About Sport Ponies

Look at Guenter Seidel—your legs can't hang down [on a pony] any more than Guenter's do [on a full-size horse]! And ponies are tougher overall. –Lendon Gray

If you look at a German Riding Pony from a distance, you don't have the perception that it's a pony. – Heather Luing

We have a saying: The ponies are "fun-sized." – Melissa Mulchahey

Luing became fascinated with German Riding Ponies in 2002 and began networking with breeders to learn everything she could about these "small warmbloods." With the advent of frozen semen, it became possible to access some of Europe's top bloodlines. Luing and her husband, who had specialized in Holsteiners and Oldenburgs, sold their warmblood mares and began concentrating on breeding performance ponies on a par with those in Germany.

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A USDF silver medalist, Luing herself turned to ponies when the warmbloods she was riding grew too challenging. "I'm five foot four, and it was hard to even bridle the horse, let alone ride in true collection," she says. "I started breeding for a pony that I wanted to ride. My stallion's a great example: Every time I get off, it's a shock how close I am to the ground because he doesn't feel small."

Now competing at Second Level, the fourteen-hand Burberry has what Luing prizes in any mount, regardless of size: "three pure gaits and a good temperament and work ethic."

The Future

Mulchahey believes that dressage's base of adult amateurs will increasingly look to smaller mounts in the coming years: "As the population ages, more people are going to

move to ponies. While the good ponies can, and do, compete with the 'big horses,' a USDF Adult Amateur Pony of the Year award at each level would encourage ponies in the US. And high-score pony ribbons at every USEF show would be a good way to reward pony owners."

For her part, Gray hopes that riders in search of good dressage mounts won't overlook ponies. "People think, 'I've got to have something more impressive.' But the huge gaits of some of these warmbloods are not for the average rider. If you want to compete, you've got to have something you can sit and something that isn't too strong for you. You've got a better chance of finding that in a pony. Everything is just a little less." ▲

Kelly Sanchez is a pony-sized freelance writer who lives outside Los Angeles.

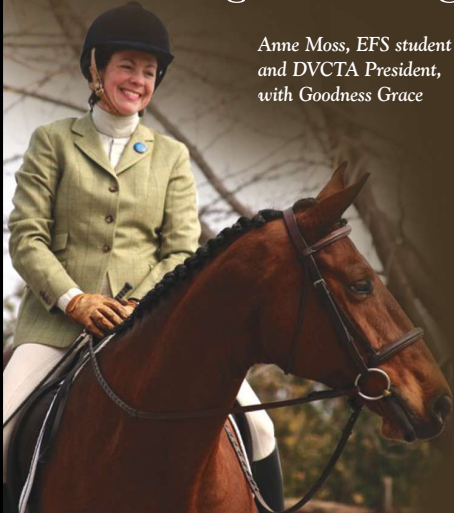


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