

DRESSAGE PONIES

A growing trend for children and adults.

By Sally Silverman

Good things really do come in small packages. In the case of dressage, that means ponies. Bucking the trend toward the bigger, heavier warmblood breeds, a number of U.S. trainers, riders and breeders are beginning to recognize their petite appeal. Ideal for children, ponies also offer a sized-to-fit alternative for adults. At five feet tall, Fern Feldman, an amateur adult dressage rider, is one of them—competing at Intermediaire I and II on Fidelio, her 14.1-hand palomino Connemara pony. Feldman represents a movement that fellow riders of all ages are starting to appreciate.

Feldman's story is typical of the revelation riders are having about pursuing their passion for dressage on a mount closer to the ground. She had been used to riding 15- to 16-hand horses, and when her trainer, Olympic veteran Lendon Gray, first told her she should consider at a 14.1-hand pony, Feldman ignored the advice. Her long-term goal had

to the ground!"

Trainer Pam Goodrich agrees that the correct proportion is crucial: a horse's size should be relative to that of its rider. One of the participating instructors in the U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF) Dressage Youth/Pony Pilot Program, Goodrich is frustrated by the stigma that ponies have faced in dressage. She sees parents who are searching for a dressage mount for their child looking only at the made FEI-level horses on the market. "These are riders who should really be riding something their size and having a good time. At 60 pounds or so, they



Fern Feldman on Fidelio, her 14.1-hand palomino Connemara pony.

been to ride in a *Concours de Dressage International* (CDI). "I knew that, as an adult, I couldn't ride a pony in a CDI, but when I saw Fidelio, I bought him instantly anyway." That was three years ago. Since then, she has also purchased 6-year-old Rialto, a 13.3-hand Welsh/Holsteiner cross.

Feldman says it's all about proportion. "I figure if I can't see over the withers, then the horse isn't right for me. My inseam measurement in relation to his size is what makes it work. Getting the bend, for example, requires the same effort as it would for a taller person on a bigger horse." And there's another advantage. "The first day I brought Deli into the barn, I asked for the canter a bit too hard, and he bucked me off. It was an easy landing because I was closer

The FEI defines ponies as those measuring at or below 148 centimeters without shoes or 149 centimeters with shoes, which is about 14.2¼ hands.

don't have the body weight to control the big trot of a 16-hand horse." It's the same for smaller adults, she says. "The relationship between rider and horse is very personal. You should be in control and able to handle the movements." Personally, the 5-foot-5-inch Goodrich says she likes her dressage horses "little and hot."

Pony Potential

Jessica Wisdom is another dressage rider who has also recently begun to appreciate the potential of the pony. A professional rider and trainer from Washington state, she is 5-foot-8-inches

tall, but fell in love with North Forks Cardi, a 14.3½-hand Welsh Cob stallion she co-owns with Cynthia Miller. Cardi is a horse that makes a big impression, despite his measurements. When he stepped into the breed ring at Dressage at Devon in September 2009, his conformation and presence captivated the judges and crowd, and he won the U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) East Coast Series Final Grand Champion Stallion and was Born in the USA high-point stallion. He has scored as high as 68 percent in the freestyle.

Cardi is not technically a pony as defined by USEF. His breeding, however, makes him eligible for registration with the American Sport Pony Registry, Weser-Em and Rheinland Pfalz-saar International (RPSI) pony division.

Wisdom explains that when a rider first gets on a pony, there is a different feeling from a horse, especially on an undeveloped pony. That changes as the rider adjusts to the pony's maximum range of motion and settles into it. Then it doesn't feel so different. "Cardi's passage actually feels bigger than that of the 16.2-hand horse I used to ride," she says. "In the course of good dressage training, the goal is to increase the natural balance and suppleness so you can maximize the range of motion in the gaits, both latitudinally and longitudinally. That goes across the board for all horses, no matter what their size or breeding. Make the horse's body mentally and physically available and the movements are there for you," she adds. That holds true when Cardi competes against the bigger boys. "I feel that we are judged fairly against horses, but I do have to work harder at some movements." Cardi's lateral work, for example, demands more expression simply because it doesn't cover as much ground.

Balance is key for Wisdom, who points out that "a pony doesn't have

as wide a wheelbase" as a bigger horse. "They are also smarter and quicker, so you need to find the pony that puts those traits to good use and not to evil." She adds that accuracy with the leg is even more crucial with a smaller mount. "There is less surface area and fewer places to go with your leg to distinguish your aids."

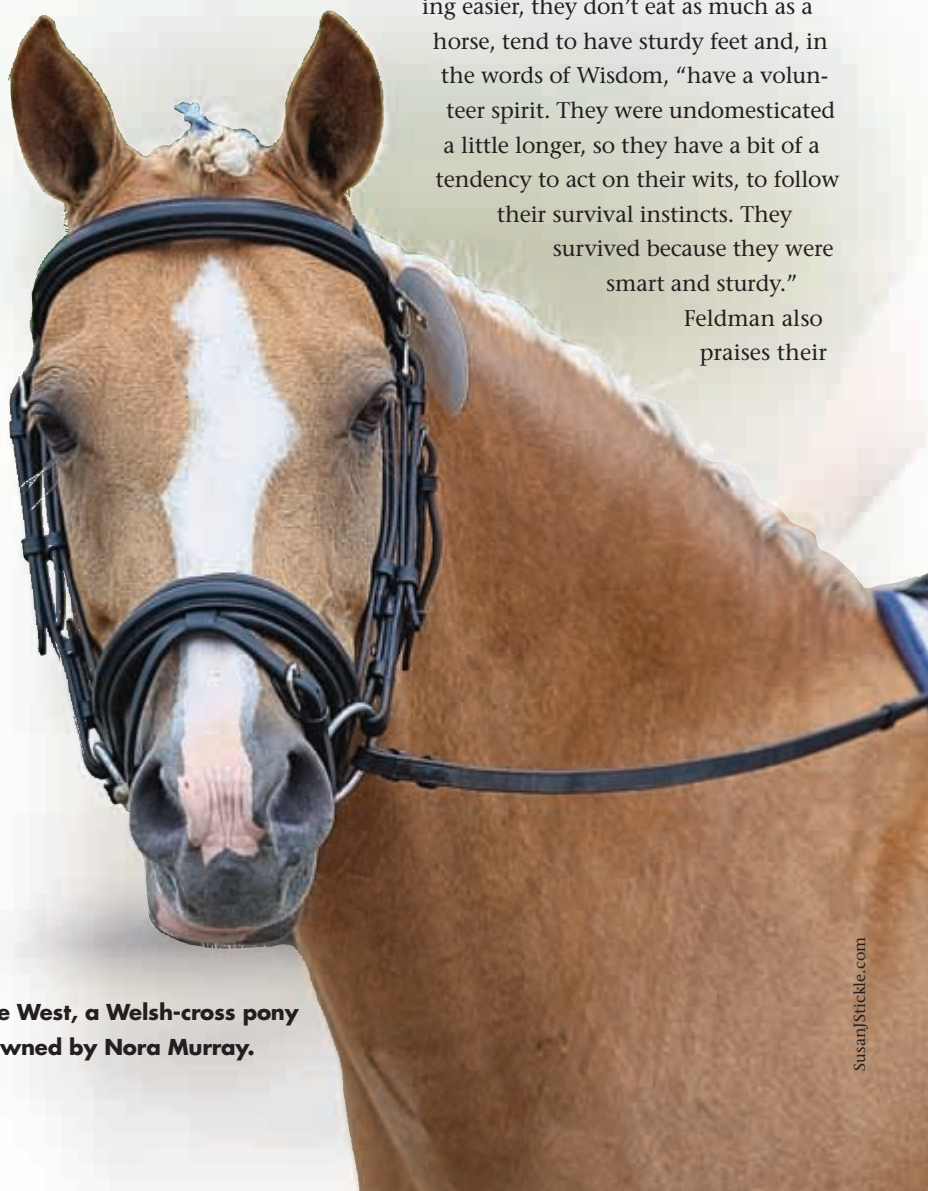
Miller explains that Cardi's even temperament is a characteristic of the breed along with a high degree of rideability. "These horses aren't so big and wild that they are unsittable," she says. "I have geared my market to middle-aged and older women between 5- and 5-foot-8-inches tall who want a horse that is fun, that you don't have to longe

before you get on and that is athletic enough to take the rider to whatever level or discipline they desire."

Miller has also shown that you can acquire those desirable characteristics without compromising quality. Conducting a clinic in which Wisdom rode Cardi, Debbie McDonald confesses she was wowed by the stallion. "Boy, he is really something," she said during Wisdom's ride. "He can compete with the best of them. He is going to have an amazing piaffe-passage."

Ponies like Cardi have a lot going for them in addition to their positive proportion to petite riders. Not only are they closer to the ground, which makes grooming, tacking, bathing and blanketing easier, they don't eat as much as a horse, tend to have sturdy feet and, in the words of Wisdom, "have a volunteer spirit. They were undomesticated a little longer, so they have a bit of a tendency to act on their wits, to follow their survival instincts. They survived because they were smart and sturdy."

Feldman also praises their



Mae West, a Welsh-cross pony is owned by Nora Murray.

Susan/Stickle.com

Down the Centerline

According to the U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF), interest in pony classes and/or divisions at USEF-Licensed dressage competitions has been on the rise. Classes specifically for ponies may include any level of dressage tests, as long as it is not a *Concours de Dressage International* (CDI) class or official FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale) Pony Test. These are international-level tests written specifically for children riding ponies. The FEI Preliminary, Team, Individual and Freestyle tests for ponies are considered the equivalent of Second Level and may only be ridden in competition by riders ages 12 to 16.

The USEF uses the FEI definition of height for ponies—any breed of horse or pony that measures at or below 148 cm without shoes or 149 cm with shoes, which is about 14.2¼ hands. With some exceptions, anyone, including adults, may ride ponies in USEF-licensed competitions in all but CDI, high-performance championships or qualifiers, and a few other classes. The first FEI Pony Rider Championship is planned for the Collecting Gaits Farm/USEF Festival of Champions in Gladstone, New Jersey, in 2011.

Pony and youth advocate Lendon Gray is always supporting the pony in dressage, and in her area (the Northeast) there are several opportunities. The first is her own show, Dressage4Kids, Inc. Youth Dressage Festival (see p. 20). While there are not specific pony classes, the whole show is oriented to young riders and their mounts. At this show, 50 percent of are on ponies (and they often beat the larger mounts).

At the same showground, Centerline Events puts on an international CDI-W/Y/J/P in the summer. The “W” means it’s a World Cup qualifier; the “Y” and “J” tell you that FEI tests for Young Riders and Juniors are offered, and the “P” means that FEI classes for ponies are offered. For a CDI competition, a pony must have an FEI passport and ride the tests specifically designed for them—FEI Pony Team, FEI Pony Individual and FEI Pony Freestyle (find them at fei.org).

However, for the past five years, the Centerline Events show has also offered “national” pony classes that adults can also enter, including an FEI test of choice. There are individual classes just for ponies from Training to FEI levels with the East Coast Pony

Cup (ECPC) as a special prize (find complete rules at centerlineevents.com). Show manager Debra Reinhardt says, “One year we had more than 25 ponies competing—all needing their pony measurement cards! Granted they were mostly in Training and First level, but each year we have had some in the FEI Test-of-Choice (TOC) class for ponies.”

Reinhardt says that show managers must understand that new classes like these need to be held three to five years before everyone realizes they are available. She suggests the following plan to get pony classes added to a show in your area:

1. Have your plan before calling the show manager.
 2. Talk to perspective competitors to get ideas of what classes they will support.
 3. Consider extra expenses that show management will have to incur if they include Pony classes and have solutions. For example,
 - If a competition specifically holds a class just for ponies, those ponies must have a USEF pony measurement card. Management must also provide a way to measure ponies if they offer pony-only classes. If management holds FEI TOC classes and some riders choose the FEI Pony Team Test, that pony does not need to be measured unless his height is in question and the ground jury decides he needs to be officially measured.
 - The Technical Delegate (TD) at a show is responsible for having a measuring stick, but the veterinarian is responsible for measuring and determining if a pony is no taller than the maximum height allowed. Keep in mind that for competitions of less than 200 horses, a vet is usually “on call” and not on show grounds. If called, someone has to wait for the vet (who may not be able to come immediately) and pay the bill. At larger shows, there is usually already be a vet on the grounds, and the TD might even own a measuring stick to bring, saving those expenses.
 4. Find a sponsor to supply the pony awards and prizes and such. This will be a big plus for the show’s management, and they will be more likely to work with you.
 5. Do all this early. Prize lists are due to the USEF in the late fall for the following spring season.
- Good Luck!



Jessica Wisdom and Cardi, a 14.3½-hand Welsh Cob stallion.

resiliency. “As adults, we might have to do that circle countless times until we get it right. The pony can do that. They don’t need to be coddled the way a horse might. What’s needed,” she adds “is to find a pony with some training. That has been unavailable [in the United States].”

Pony Programs & Progress

There is an abundance of dressage ponies in Europe, and most of the really good dressage ponies come from there, according to Goodrich. “We are far behind the European pony dressage movement,” she says. “European children start riding well-schooled ponies with good, solid basics.”

There are good pony breeders in the United States but not enough. “It’s not like we don’t have a lot of beautiful ponies,” says Goodrich. “People need to realize that kids have to be on ponies.” She acknowledges that it takes a long time to train a dressage pony and says, at the moment, the return on the investment of that training is not so great. “When our mindset changes and we see the value in dressage ponies, that will change, too. At the moment, there is a fortune in hunter ponies.”

Olympian Debbie McDonald agrees.

2010 FEI Pony Championships

The 2010 FEI European Pony Championships were held at Bishop Burton College in Yorkshire, England, in August. A closely fought competition gave the Netherlands pony team the coveted team gold ahead of their long-time adversaries from Germany.



Dirk Caremans

Antoinette te Riele on Golden Girl

The Dutch team of Dana van Lierop (Equestricons Lord Champion), Antoinette te Riele (Golden Girl), Maria van den Dungen (Rembrandt DDH) and Suzanne van de Ven (Majos Cannon) scored an average of 73.741 percent against an average of 73 percent for the German team. "I am really happy because this group has been working together for several years to achieve this gold," commented Dutch *chef d'équipe* Tineke Bartels.


Denmark claimed team bronze and Great Britain finished fourth (fei.org).

“Pony divisions are so large in the hunter world. There are a lot of little girls that love ponies, but they are afraid to jump. They have no place to really look for something to ride.”

As U.S. dressage as a whole continues to grow, the place for dressage ponies becomes more apparent. “We are in a phase right now where we are trying to make the base really strong so that the peak is really strong,” says Goodrich. As U.S. dressage programs for children slowly grow, the need for good ponies is also growing.

“Anyone who is serious about competing at Second Level or above needs to be comfortable that they are going to get a 6 or 7 in their gaits,” says Feldman. “These are the ponies that need to be developed [for dressage].”

The USEF has a Dressage Youth/Pony Pilot Program for riders 20-years old and younger, with an emphasis on 10- to 15-year-old riders. In 2009, international trainers and competitors including Gray, Goodrich, Arlene Page and Michael Barisone traveled the country helping young riders progress. This year, Jeremy Steinberg has been named the first USEF National Dressage Youth Coach (see Arena, p. 15).

Wisdom predicts the market will trend more toward ponies for children and petite adult amateurs. “I think that riders and trainers are starting to embrace the idea that ponies and crosses can be ideal. I think the market will come to bear that ponies are the wave of the future. The more we see ponies designed for their purpose, the more we will see success.” We are the generation that will bring ponies to a more receptive audience. 

Find out more about dressage ponies in the fourth edition (Jan. 2010) of the USEF Dressage Pony Handbook. Download it at usef.org/documents/international/dressage/Pony-Booklet-Info.pdf.