

# Not Just for Kids Any More

Both pro and amateur adult riders are finding a lot to love about ponies. Conclusion of a series on ponies in dressage.

BY ALISON HEAD

*"TOUGH AS NAILS": Sport-pony fans laud their equines' hardiness as well as their dressage talent. Lauren Chumley and the Morgan gelding Avatar's Jazzman were the Fourth Level Open champions at the 2013 National Dressage Pony Cup and also received the Morgan Pony award.*





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Ponies and kids—the two naturally go together. And in dressage, there are many opportunities for younger riders to train and compete with their ponies, from the very beginning of the sport through the more advanced FEI Pony division.

Increasingly, however, adult riders are choosing ponies for dressage competition. Lauren Chumley, a professional based at Freedom Farm in Flemington, NJ; and Karen Erickson, an adult amateur from Clovis, CA, are two riders who have embraced the world of dressage ponies with much success.

Chumley's experience with ponies began with her first Grand Prix mount, a 14.2-hand Welsh pony/Morgan-cross gelding named Nwewyn. Nwewyn taught Chumley to appreciate the bravery and work ethic of a good pony—and she also enjoyed surprising her competitors as Nwewyn held his own against his much-larger peers. But what impresses Chumley most about her ponies is their hardiness.

"Ponies are tough as nails!" Chumley says. "I've been known to compete a pony in a hunter pace, a horse trial, and an FEI-level dressage test within a two-week period—not something many horses would be up for."

Since that first foray into the world of ponies, Chumley has continued to train and compete ponies for her clients. Current mount Avatar's Jazzman, a 13-year-old, 14.1-hand Morgan gelding owned by Melissa Dowling, competed at Fourth Level and Prix St. Georges in 2014 with impressive results: He placed third at Fourth Level at Dressage at Devon, won championship titles at the National Dressage Pony Cup in Kentucky at Fourth and FEI levels (more about the NDPC in a minute), and scored USDF All-Breeds awards wins at Fourth Level and Prix St. Georges. And to prove his versatility, Avatar's Jazzman also competed successfully in novice-level eventing. His younger stablemate, Nikolas, a four-year-old, 14.2-hand Westfalen Riding Pony, has begun his career with high scores at Training and First Levels and will also compete in eventing this year.

Chumley trains primarily with New Jersey-based Grand Prix-level rider Michael Barisone, who, she says, has always been tolerant of her "penchant for ponies" and enjoys working with them, particularly with the higher-level movements.

Erickson's current competition pony is Brando, a five-year-old New Forest Pony stallion that she imported as a youngster. In 2014, Brando began competing at Training Level, ending the year with impressive wins in the California Dressage Society Adult Amateur Four-Year-Old Futurity and the Great American/USDF Region 7 Adult Amateur Training Level Championship. They have begun competing at First Level in 2015 with scores to 70 percent. Erickson also has a young Weser-Ems pony that will begin his show career soon. ➔





THE KEY TO HAPPINESS: Karen Erickson and her New Forest Pony stallion, Brando

As an amateur rider, Erickson says, she loves ponies because their small stature has enabled her to develop her own riding and build her confidence. “Riding ponies allowed me to learn to ride instead of worrying about being on a horse that was big and overpowering. I can feel what the ponies are doing. With the big horses, it was too much movement for me to feel anything but loft!”

Like Chumley, Erickson loves her ponies’ brave attitudes and cherishes their smart personalities, although she is quick to point out that they can test the rider. “Give them an inch and they’ll take a mile,” she jokes, “but it makes me very aware of what I am doing as a rider.”

Also like Chumley, Erickson works with a trainer—Californian Merrie Velden—who, she says, is supportive of her pony habit. Erickson trains her ponies primarily on her own with Velden’s step-by-step guidance, saying that only occasionally do her mounts need a professional “tune-up.”

## Competition Opportunities for Adult Pony Riders

Chumley and Erickson agree that it’s becoming much more common to see ponies competing in dressage in the US, as well as to see adults riding those ponies. The result is that Chumley and other pros are going down center line on ponies more often, preparing them for their careers in the show ring.

Many USEF/USDF-licensed shows are starting to offer not only the FEI Pony tests, but also “pony only” classes for both junior riders and their adult counterparts. Some shows, Erickson notes, are beginning to provide special recognition for adults on ponies. For instance, this past winter the Global Dressage Festival in Wellington, FL, began offering pony-only classes through Third Level. Chumley, for one, hopes that classes will be extended to the higher levels as participation increases, she says. Also on Chumley’s wish list: an International Equestrian Federation (FEI) rule change, permitting adults to compete on ponies in CDIs (FEI-recognized dressage competitions).

One US-based national dressage competition already offers a wide range of opportunities to pony riders of all ages. Established in 2007 by Jenny Carol and held annually at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington since 2010, the National Dressage Pony Cup ([NationalDressagePonyCup.com](http://NationalDressagePonyCup.com)) is making an effort to bring a championship-level experience to dressage pony riders of all ages. Eligible ponies can compete for awards and prize money at Introductory through Fourth Levels and in the FEI Pony tests. Pony riders also may compete at designated National Dressage Pony Cup “partner shows” for awards as well as year-end NDPC awards. This year’s NDPC national show will be held September 5-6 as part of the MSED A Dressage at the Park I and II USEF/USDF-licensed dressage competitions.

## Ponies = Happiness!

As dressage ponies gain in popularity, pony breeding, historically strong in Europe, has made great strides in the US as well (see "The Petite Warmblood," May 2015, for a detailed look at the development of the German Riding Pony). The importation of several top pony stallions, as well as the availability of frozen semen, have enabled American breeders to introduce the best dressage bloodlines and to produce ponies with the gaits needed for dressage.

According to Chumley, today's dressage ponies have gaits equal in reach and scope to those of their larger counterparts. Breeders, sellers, and buyers of ponies have been helped in large part by the growth of Internet opportunities to advertise ponies and to spread the word about pony riders and their accomplishments.

"I can't say enough about how my life has changed for the better with ponies in it," says Erickson. "They bring me happiness on a daily basis." ▲

*Alison Head, a former USDF Region 1 director, is a member of the USEF Dressage Committee, the current president of the Virginia Dressage Association, and a USEF "R" dressage and dressage-seat equitation judge. She owns and operates Looking Glass Farm in Hamilton, VA.*

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