



PONY POWER: USDF-certified instructor Rebecca Cord rides Popeye (FS Pour l'Amour – SPS Nice Touch, Night Star I), a 2002 Westfalen Pony stallion owned by Summit Sporthorses Ltd. (NJ) and standing at Hilltop Farm Inc. (MD)

The 'Downsized' Dressage Horse

If you're a youth or a petite lady, a pony or small horse might be just the ticket to dressage success

BY STEPHANIE J. CORUM

Here are some dressage-showing complaints you may have heard:

"I can't compete against the big warmbloods on my Arabian/Morgan/Quarter Horse/pony."

"The judge doesn't like Arabians/Morgans/Quarter Horses/ponies/insert breed name here."

These perceptions, in part, are what keep some dressage enthusiasts riding big warmbloods—horses they may need a stepladder to saddle and whose gaits may prove a challenge to sit. Frankly, a horse that's too big for you, or too big of a mover for your body to handle, can be intimidating.

Dressage in the US is dominated by women, many of whom are petite in stature. In addition, there's an increasing

emphasis on attracting youth to our sport. In recent years, some of these riders have turned to smaller horse breeds and ponies. In this article, we'll look at some of these more modestly sized equine partners, and we'll hear from riders and trainers who have happily downsized.

Why Downsize?

Most dressage riders in this country are female adult amateurs over the age of 30. Professional trainers and instructors work with many of these women, and at times they watch them struggle with big horses.

Rebecca Cord, a USDF "L" graduate, USDF bronze and

silver medalist, and USDF-certified instructor through Second Level in Lancaster County, PA, says some adult amateurs stall out in their progression because of the physical demands of riding bigger horses. A lot of riders develop a fear factor as they age, and “the little ones are more comforting,” Cord says.

Standing five feet five, Cord says she initially got asked to ride smaller horses because of her stature. Soon she developed a fondness for the pint-sized mounts, praising the sport ponies as “super fancy, super athletic, and much kinder on the body.” Although Cord continues to ride horses of all sizes, she admits that the smaller ones are physically easier for her to manage.

Bailey Cook agrees. A USDF bronze, silver, and gold medalist and a USDF Instructor Trainer Program faculty member, Cook, of Carrboro, NC, has seen her share of overmounted middle-aged, petite riders.

“Being on the big horses is intimidating,” says Cook. “Everything about smaller horses is easier as far as daily work and handling. They are more rideable—everything from doing a ten-meter circle, to getting your leg around them, to their movement. We [petite women] are built proportionally to better fit them.”

At five feet one, Cook got the idea that she wanted a sport pony because she was feeling burned out in the horse business and needed a change, she says. When she met the German Riding Pony stallion Sweet Rock Solid (Sweet Dream SF – Elandy, Downland Donner), she approached owner Louise Rascoe, of Longview Sport Ponies LLC in Rougemont, NC. Eventually Rascoe gave Cook the ride on “Stibby-Me,” and Cook says the experience has brought back fun childhood memories of her time training large ponies.

“Not all trainers want to ride ponies,” says Cook. “I have a niche because I can ride them and I enjoy them.”

Only once has she felt “undersized” in dressage competition, says Cook: “We ended our 2007 show season at the [Great American/USDF] Region 1 Championships, placing fourth in our First Level championship class behind [international competitors] Chris Hickey and George Williams. Standing in line at the awards ceremony was the only time I have ever felt sort of small with Stibby.”

USDF bronze, silver, and gold medalist Kim Lacy, Arlington, WA, grew up riding and showing Arabians and is an Arabian Horse Association (AHA) national champion, although she rides all breeds. She says she finds that the Arabian’s build is a good fit for riders with short arms, a narrow pelvis, or both.

These dressage pros agree that riders with back issues or less flexibility find the gaits on a smaller horse easier to stay



PONIES ARE FUN! USDF Instructor Trainer Program faculty member Bailey Cook rides Sweet Rock Solid, a German Riding Pony stallion owned by Longview Sport Ponies LLC (NC)

Mythbusters: Small Horses and Dressage

Myth: A pony or small horse can’t be a big mover.

Truth: They may not cover as much ground as a taller horse with a bigger stride, but many breeds have individuals with three pure gaits and active, free movement.

Myth: Extravagant movement trumps accuracy.

Truth: The gait score makes up only one part of a dressage test (and it includes the component of regularity, which isn’t related to scope). Accurate figures, quality transitions, and the like go a long way toward garnering points.

Myth: Warmbloods consistently score much higher in dressage than other breeds.

Truth: In a study of dressage scores and breeds (“A Statistical Look at Dressage Competition,” November 2010), a team of five researchers determined that warmbloods scored an average of just 2.5 percentage points higher than other breeds. The study grouped horses into nine breed types: warmblood, Quarter Horse, Appaloosa/Paint, Thoroughbred or TB cross, Arabian or Arabian cross, Morgan, Iberian, Connemara/Welsh, and Percheron.



SPORT-HORSE MOVEMENT: *The purebred Arabian WH Dallas+//, ridden by Kim Lacy, has wowed dressage judges with his excellent movement*

with. What's more, they say, ponies and smaller horses are just plain fun!

"Everyone should have a fancy dressage pony sometime in their lives," Cook laughs.

Ponies, Arabians, and Morgans are all known for their intelligence, which as horse people know can be both a blessing and a curse. Typically, however, smart horses are willing to work and want to please.

"Arabians will give 110 percent for their riders," says Lacy.

Little Horses, Big Competitors

"I haven't had any prejudices from any of the judges that are scoring me any different [on the pony] than [on] other horses," says Cook. To be strongly competitive, anyone interested in sport ponies should look for one with an active hind leg and free shoulder movement—the same attributes sought in any dressage horse, she says.

Lacy says she still sees some stereotyping of Arabians in dressage competition, but "this is getting better as people are seeing more quality horses of the 'other' breeds and they are becoming more competitive."

Years ago, Lacy relates, she was showing her Arabian

WH Dallas+// (Gdansk+ – Egyptian Lace) in a large Fourth Level class at a USEF-licensed/USDF-recognized dressage competition. "After my test, the judge stopped me and asked what breed my horse was. I told her Arabian. She asked what the other half was. I said Arabian. She looked at me, shocked, and said she didn't think a purebred could move like that. I laughed and told her, 'Well, yes, they can!' We won the class, and years later I got my [USDF] gold medal on that same horse."

Arabians do tend to lack the hind-end power and strength that come naturally to many warmbloods, Lacy says. As a result, "As a rider and trainer, you need to take the time to develop the strength needed for the upper levels. If you take the time in the training of smaller horses that are not necessarily built for higher-level work, they can develop the strength required and the ability to sit."

The Market

Generally speaking, prices for sport ponies and horses under 16 hands are less than those for larger horses. Top sport ponies can be pricey, but non-warmblood breeds often have lower price tags than their warmblood counterparts.

"Even though the economy has been tough, there's been a pretty good market for horses priced between ten and twenty thousand dollars," says Cook. "Maybe people that were in the market didn't want to take the risk on a big horse."

Cook notes that there has been a greater effort to promote dressage ponies in her area of North Carolina, which helps increase their visibility.

Like Cook, Cord has established a market niche as a seller of quality ponies and small horses for dressage: "I have people call me because they know I have small horses," although some buyers remain leery about downsizing, she says.

Lacy points out that the AHA (arabianhorses.org) developed its own Sport Horse National Arabian and Half-Arabian Championship Horse Show to encourage participation in dressage, hunter/jumper, and other sport-horse disciplines. (The organization also offers dressage rider awards and sponsors USDF All-Breeds awards.) "These people are now bringing their horses

When we can have our kids get in the show ring and feel the movement of a great pony, they'll be so ahead of the game when they get to horses.

—USEF national dressage young-horse coach Scott Hassler

to the open USEF shows as well, and people are getting more exposure to the breed. They are seeing how nice they really are and how much fun their riders are having with them. Arabian breeders are beginning to notice that there is a market for sport horses and are now breeding specifically for them.”

The AHA is not the only organization to recognize the value of the dressage market. There are Morgan breeders who focus on producing sport-horse-type individuals, for instance. Connemaras, Haflingers, American Saddlebreds, Thoroughbreds, Quarter Horses—these and many other horse and pony breeds have individuals competing successfully in dressage. The USDF All-Breeds Awards Program and its list of participating organizations is a good place to start: Visit usdf.org/Awards/All-Breeds to learn more.

An Amateur Rider's Perspective

In 2013, Morgan Williams, Cape Girardeau, MO, competed in the Training Level Adult Amateur championship at the US Dressage Finals, and she did it on her 15.1-hand Morab gelding, Sahara's Raja.

Williams is five feet three and weighs a mere 100 pounds. When she started horse-shopping, she was looking for a good riding horse, not a dressage horse per se. She says she was drawn to the Morab mare Sahara's Starr because she was “super smart and had a lot of personality.”

About five months into the new partnership, Sahara's Starr began gaining weight, despite being put on a diet and being in regular work. Williams soon learned that she'd gotten two for the price of one: Her mare was in foal. Sahara's Raja was the result.

In time Williams discovered that her horses excelled in dressage, and she began to focus on the sport.

“They're just super smart,” she says. “They'll do whatever you want. They have a lot of energy but need a job all the time.”

Riding Sahara's Starr, Williams earned her USDF bronze medal. She qualified Sahara's Raja for the inaugu-

ral US Dressage Finals, but his nerves got the better of him in the Kentucky Horse Park environment and they did not place. Still, it was a fun experience that she hopes to be able to repeat, she says.



SUCCESSFUL CROSS: *The Morab gelding Sahara's Raja and owner/rider Morgan Williams were the 2013 Great American/USDF Region 4 Training Level adult-amateur champions and competed at the inaugural US Dressage Finals*

Small Is Beautiful

A horse whose size and shape suits you physically will help you to feel more comfortable and confident in the saddle, our experts say. In addition, a well-matched pair produces a pleasing and harmonious picture in the show arena.

But there's more than looks and size when it comes to finding the right horse or pony for you. Cord recommends making a list of the traits you desire in your next dressage partner, including temperament and personality as well as gaits and movement. A reputable instructor can help you to find an equine that you can learn on, have fun with, and

work with toward your dressage goals. And if that happens to be on a smaller horse or a pony, then consider yourself part of an emerging trend in our sport. ▲

**People would buy big, fancy horses,
and I would come trucking in
on a pony and beat them.**

—Olympian Lendon Gray on the late 14.2-hand Connemara/Thoroughbred cross Seldom Seen, who won many Grand Prix-level titles and is a member of the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame

Stephanie J. Corum is a freelance writer in the equine industry and the author of two children's books, Goats with Coats and Antics in the

Attic. At five feet four inches, she enjoys riding smaller horses in dressage and currently owns a 16-hand Arabian/Dutch Warmblood cross.