

by Laura Hart

In this day of technological advances and communications at the speed of light, there comes a breath of fresh air from the ancient British Isles.

With Queen Elizabeth II as patron of their breed society, the Fell pony may be considered only for the elite - but that's not the case. The rare Fell pony is much more known for working a farm field as he is showing in the dressage ring. His hardiness and usefulness is legendary in his homeland, and in North America, his popularity is growing by leaps and bounds.

The Fell is a hard-working native British pony breed. Its name is derived from the old Norse word for "hill," a word that is still in everyday use in its home range. Even now, some herds are still allowed to run and breed in a semi-feral environment out on the wild windy fells (hills) of northern England.

Historically bred and raised on the rugged hills in the northern English counties of Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Northumberland, the Fell pony is a delightful animal of good temperament and intelligence. With legs and hooves like iron and plenty of dense, flat bone below the knee, Fell ponies are strong, tireless, surefooted and thrifty. Renowned for their ground-covering trot, leg feathering, and profuse mane and tail, they come in four colors. Over the past few decades, black has become the predominant color, followed by brown, bay and gray. Some of the oldest present-day Fell pony men prefer a brown or bay pony, because they say it cannot be beaten for hardiness. A star and/or a little white on or below the hind fetlock is acceptable.

The lay of their shoulders, combined with will- ingness and stamina, make Fell ponies comfortable

long-distance riding mounts. The depth of their girth and soundness of limb and foot make them trouble-free competitors for driving, jumping or dressage.

During the Roman occupation on the border between England and Scotland, auxiliary troops were brought in from other countries to help man Hadrian's Wall, which separated the two countries. These troops would have brought along their own war stallions, and many of these were probably left behind to breed and produce a mixture of types in northern England.

A cross between these French, Friesian, German, Polish or Spanish horses with the Celtic pony is believed to have helped shape many British native pony breeds, including the Fell (79 A.D. to about 420 A.D.).

Over the centuries, the breed has adapted to changing cultural needs by working as pack ponies; doing light arable work on farms; shepherding on the fells (hills); being mounts in sporting events such as trotting races; and serving in deer stalking (carrying game for hunters). Fells were infrequently used in mines because of their taller pony height. Smaller breeds such as the Shetland and Welsh Section A were more popular for this.

Fells today still have a reputation for being easy to maintain. They can work all day on a small ration and will thrive where many animals would find it difficult to survive. They are currently used in North America in venues such as driving, showing and farming.

The Fell temperament is typical to other British native pony breeds, in that the instinct for survival has been bred into these native breeds for centuries. Because of this instinct, Fells can sometimes provide a challenge to inexperienced or wary people.

Intelligence, curiosity, stamina and mischievousness can be attributes of a Fell, which can pose these unique challenges. Sensible horse training is always paramount but it is especially so with the Fell. It is worth keeping in mind that when working with a Fell, you need

to have a mentality of cooperation and partnership.

Fells, just like all equines, are individuals, and they can vary in temperament. They could be compared with working dog breeds - they are meant for activity, which engages their mind and curiosity

The Fell pony breed matures late, sometimes not until age 7. Most Fells in their native country are left to run free until age 2 or 3. At that time, they are



Photography by Laura Hart

Gray Fells are born dark - either black or dark brown and then slowly turn gray as they age. Orton Hall Dusky is a 9-year-old gray Fell mare. She is shown here during the annual Fell Pony Breed Show held in August in Penrith, Cumbria, England.

lightly trained and then often turned back out until ages 4 or 5, when they will begin light and straight riding, without much bending of their spines. It is suggested that mares not be bred until they are least 3; otherwise, irreparable damage may be done to internal organs and reproductive organs. It also may restrict the mare's growth and maturity.

Their desired height is 13.1-13.2 hands, but the maximum height allowed is 14 hands high. They are capable of carrying a grown man all day, and many are gentle enough for older children and the disabled. Fells are presented at shows clean and well groomed, yet untrimmed and unadorned to emphasize their natural state.

The official breed registry, England's Fell Pony Society, was formed in 1916. Queen Elizabeth II herself is a knowledgeable owner and breeder. Her husband, His Royal Highness Prince Philip, often competes in driving events with a four-in-hand of the Queen's Fells.

The challenges of preserving this breed are elaborated on in this quote from equine scholar Clive Richardson: "In recent years, the number of Fell ponies bred not only off the fell but outside of the British Isles has increased, with new studs in Holland, Germany, America and elsewhere being established. It is vitally imperative that these enthusiastic and committed new breeders maintain a clear focus on the type of animal they are trying to produce.

"It is relatively easy for a breed to change out of all recognition as a result of environment and not adhering to the original breed standard. The American Shetland Pony, examples of which I have had the misfortune to judge in the United States, is the proof of this. Indiscriminately crossed with Hackney ponies to produce a flashy show animal, they bear no resemblance at all to the native pony of the Shetland Islands.

"By obtaining sound breeding stock, replicating the ponies natural environment as far as possible, maintaining close links with the parent society, using Fells in a wide range of activities, and keeping in mind a clear picture of what a Fell pony should look like, the dangers of breed type being lost are minimized."

Another danger facing this breed is the notion that the Fell is a small version of the Friesian horse.

This perception is partially because black is now the most common color for Fells, and because of the growing awareness of the Friesian breed. The danger arises if the focus and presentation of a breed is compromised by such a perception, possibly then leading to a change in the direction of breeding standards. This has happened with many other breeds in the past. A careful study of the Fell pony breed standard will show that the body type/structure and the movement of the Fell clearly differs from the Friesian

horse. By seeing the Fell in its natural environment, with its various body types and color ranges, one realizes the true nature and scope of the Fell pony breed.

There are fewer than 6,000 registered Fell ponies worldwide. However, the breed's integrity and usefulness have recently come to light and exportations are on the rise. To date, there are about 70 Fell ponies in North America. Because there is currently no official daughter society or club recognized by the mother society, North American Fell ponies must be registered in the British Fell Pony Society Stud Book.

For work or play, it has been said, "You cannot put a Fell to the wrong job." The traditional hill breeders of Britain have carefully preserved this rare breed's ancestral type and the hardiness and savvy of the Celtic mountain ponies. The purebred Fell should remain a preservation breed.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Fell Pony Society
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A list of North American breeders may be found on the web site at:

<http://www.raresteeds.com/fellponysociety>

You may e-mail Georgina Callister

gcalister@bullgill.fsnet.co.uk

The Website for the Fell Pony Museum is

<http://www.fellpony.f9.co.uk/>



Lunesdale Mountain Princess at 4 years old Owned by Nicholas Woolley, Ridden by Emma Woolley. Photo courtesy of the Fell Pony Journal and Archive

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