

Heritage breed of Fell Pony is riding high

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MANITOWOC

Good things come in small packages. Take Fell Ponies. Standing less than 14 hands tall and quite fetching with their luxuriant manes and tails, the rare English breed of mountain pony inspires double takes wherever they're found.

Melissa Kreuzer fell under the spell. She was a fan of Friesian horses until she made the acquaintance of one of the smaller breed that, although they look like miniature Friesians, are not genetically related.

Intrigued, Kreuzer searched for information and today the pastures of her Dream Hayven Farm near Kewaskum abound with Fells. "The more I found out about them, the more I liked them, so I sold my Friesians and now have Fells," she said.

The lineage of Fell Ponies traces back to Roman times in England, where it was bred as a pack pony. The Vikings used the strong, placid ponies for plowing and sled pulling, and the Normans for sheepherding. The sure-footed animals ferried wool and other produce into London, and



Melissa Kreuzer, of Dream Hayven Farm in Kewaskum, rides Littletree Bodini, a purebred Fell Pony stallion from England. The sturdy, easygoing breed of mountain pony is a rarity in the U.S.

(Photo by Carole Curtis)



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The breed took its name from the land, the Cumbrian Fells, or Cumbrian hills, where it originated. They are some of the hardiest ponies around, Kreuzer said, noting some herds are still reared in a semi-feral state, similar to American mustangs. They receive basic care, but are otherwise left to run free on the fells for large portions of the year.

The Fell Pony Society was formed in 1916. There are less than 6,000 of the animals in the world. Most are in England, although there are Fells in Germany, Australia, Holland, France and North America. At present, there are about 250 registered in the U.S. with about 40 foals added each year, Kreuzer said.

The breed is considered endangered and the gene pool is small. On the farm website, Kreuzer said seeing the Fells in their natural environment in England gave her an appreciation for what the ponies are about, why they move and think the way they do, and why they must continue to do so to remain true-to-type Fell ponies. "I feel compelled to take part in their preservation," she noted.

Nearly 90 percent of Fell Ponies are black, although Kreuzer's stallion, Littletree Bodini, is classified as brown because of a faint tawniness around his nostrils. Like all true Fells, "Bo" has an abundant shock of forelock, heavy mane and a thick sweeping tail, and fully feathered fetlocks that swish with his fancy footwork.

The stallion, born in 2002 in Cumbria, England, is the son of Rylestone Black Knight and Lunesdale Gypsy Rose, daughter of Lunesdale White Rose who is considered a matriarch of the breed. Bo was named Supreme Yearling Champion at the Lancashire Show, claimed titles in Mountain & Moorland ridden and in-hand and produced championship offspring before Kreuzer imported him a year ago.

She settled him at the 37-acre horse farm she owns near the Kettle Moraine. The breeding farm, with its new barn, indoor arena and location less than five minutes away from 30 miles of state trails, is dedicated to the native UK ponies.

"Our imported breeding stock is carefully selected from established European bloodlines," Kreuzer notes. "We focus on producing performance Fells with family-friendly attitudes."

A well-bred Fell Pony stands between 13 and 14 hands high at the withers and gives a clear impression of strength. He has a small, well-formed head and ears, and a neck long enough to give "good length of rein." He will show strength in his neck, deep body, loins and hindquarters.

Fell Ponies have the reputation of being tough, enormously strong with great stamina, active paces and a fast trot. They are considered a first-class, all-around riding pony, excellent for trekking, going well under saddle or harness, and well-suited for show jumping and dressage.

Queen Elizabeth II is a fan and a patron of the Fell Pony Society. Her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, drives the queen's Fell ponies in international driving competitions.

Kreuzer has found the breed to be intelligent and easygoing. "They enjoy doing new

things and they're great ponies for kids and junior riders," she said. Although Fells are in the pony class, they are capable of carrying a 240-pound person, she pointed out. That strength and their versatility means a single pony can handle the needs of a family that might otherwise require two or three more specialized animals.

Prices for Dream Hayven Farm Fell Pony weanlings run about \$5,500, while mature animals, breeding stock and trained, well-broke animals go for much more. Breeding fees for Littletree Bodini are \$500.

Kreuzer has a degree in equine management and has been safety certified as a licensed riding instructor. She is a member of the Fell Pony Society and its affiliate in the U.S., the Fell Pony Society of North America, where she has served as promotions director since 2007. Along with her daughter, she enjoys parades, exhibitions, carriage driving and participating in historical re-enactments.

The breed's trademark action was on display during the Parade of Breeds at the 2009 Horse-A-Rama in Manitowoc. Kreuzer will also be at the Minnesota Horse Expo in St. Paul before heading to the U.K. for the Fell Pony Society Stallion Show and a visit to the Littletree Stud. June brings the Bit of Wales Show and Mountain & Moorland Competition in Ladysmith, followed by a train robbery on July 18 in Laona, and the Dressage Pony Cup at the end of July in Wilmington, Ohio.

Kreuzer considers herself "incredibly lucky" to live and work with Fells. Her family is living their dream as they serve as stewards and ambassadors, busying themselves with the care, training, riding and exhibiting of the unusual, head-turning breed.

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