

# German Riding Ponies

## PINT-SIZED DRESSAGE COMPETITORS

By Ann Daum Kustar

What looks like a Warmblood, moves like a Warmblood, but wears a cob-sized bridle? A German Riding Pony of course! The Germans have been breeding and campaigning these little dressage dynamos for the past 45 years, and slowly American dressage riders are starting to follow suit. What's different about the breed on this side of the ocean? For one thing there are fewer of them, but more significantly and more frequently, they are ridden by small adults rather than by children.



### Meet BEAUJOLAIS

"I feel invincible on my stallion Beaujolais," says Natalie Cwik, owner of Tenacious Acres Sport Ponies. "I wasn't a pony person," Cwik continues, "but after sitting on Beaujolais, now I see why people are so enthralled with them. I mean, they are the perfect size, and their work ethic is incredible—Beaujolais is like the energizer bunny!"

Cwik imported Beaujolais from the Rheinland Pfalz-Saar district of Germany as a yearling, and hasn't looked back since. "He was kind of a funny-looking two-year old," she remembers. "His head was the biggest thing about him! But he had something special about him, right from the start, and he could move! By the time he was four and had matured, he was a knockout."

Beaujolais is sired by the important foundation pony stallion Brillant, who stood in the Weser Ems region of Germany. Brillant was born in England, and carried the traditionally successful mix of Welsh, English Thoroughbred and Arabian in his veins. When crossed on German pony mares, this stallion made a big impact on the breed, siring 35 approved stallions, 23 state premium mares, and over 200 daughters approved for breeding.

"These ponies move like the big horses," Cwik says, "The walk is probably the weakest link for the ponies in general, but they can do anything a big horse can, and they're so much more rideable. Beaujolais is so kind, so willing to work, and he never says 'no,' but rather 'sure I can!'"

One thing most owners of German Riding Ponies (sometimes referred to as GRPs) agree on is that these ponies have some real advantages over the big guys in terms of their temperament and rideability. "The German Riding Ponies are self confident, very smart, very quick to learn, like a pony, but they don't have the attitude of the pure ponies," Cwik says. "And don't get me wrong, there are many amazing ponies out there, but I love the combination that is the German Riding Pony.

"I can go to a show, and I've got an eleven year old daughter who's a peanut. She can be inside his stall, she can take him out walking around, and I never worry. And this is with a stallion! On a scale of 1-10, his temperament is about a 20."



Top: Beaujolais from Tenacious Acres showing 3rd level (Photo by OC Photo).

Bottom: Beaujolais showing 3rd level (Photo by Equipix). Inset: Beaujolais' sire Brillant.

Natalie Cwik has competed Beaujolais successfully through third level, winning numerous USDF All Breeds awards along the way. Now they're schooling fourth level and Prix St. Georges and enjoying every moment together. He's also been a standout as a breeding stallion. In 2008 the Beaujolais colt Brio, out of a Hanoverian mare by the Weltmeyer son Wonderful, scored an impressive 9.2 on conformation and 8.8 on movement, finishing as the high scoring foal out of both horses and ponies of the entire Rheinland Pfalz-Saar International (RPSI) inspection tour.

"I loved my big horses. I rode them for 30 years and was never a pony person until I got one," Cwik continues. "Then I ended up gelding my horse stallion, and I'm never going back. I never would have imagined a 14 hand pony would be my end all!"

While in Germany the standard for the German Riding Pony limits their size to 148 cm, or 14.2 hands, some ponies inevitably overgrow. American breeders prize these overgrown ponies, claiming the biggest market exists for a "pony" standing 15 to 15.3 hands – the perfect size for the average adult amateur lady dressage rider.

## Meet MAKUBA

Makuba, a 14.1 and 1/2 hand German Riding Pony owned by Klaus Biesenthal of Bell Oaks Farm in Freeport, Illinois, has the honor of being the first imported German Riding



Pony stallion to stand in the United States. Sired by the Trakehner stallion Major Domus, Makuba's 100 day test scores previewed successes to come. He scored 10 for temperament and 9 for rideability, 10 for walk and 9's for trot, canter and free jumping. Makuba truly set the bar for German Riding Ponies in sport in this country.

"Makuba was bred by my father, who with a friend helped start this GRP thing in Germany," Biesenthal explains. "I wanted a pair, so in 1998 I decided to bring six of these ponies over, thinking to sell some and keep a pair. Well, within six weeks they were all gone! So then I talked Dad into letting me have Makuba. I imported him along with one mare."

Left & top right: Makuba from Bell Oaks Farm (Driving photo by Kirsten Barry).  
Bottom right: Popeye standing at Hilltop Farm, owned by Summit Sporthorses.

"Makuba had done his stallion testing in Germany, and then he wasn't ridden for several years while just breeding mares," Biesenthal continues. "When I brought him over in October, he wasn't broke to drive. On December 8th we drove him in a Christmas parade hitched to a mare!"



"Makuba is just like that—special. In three years under two junior riders, Makuba went from training level to Intermediare 1, always ranking in the top two or three horses or ponies ridden by a junior in this country. Then I drove him, and made it all the way to Advanced in combined driving," Biesenthal reports.

Makuba's offspring have excelled in a variety of disciplines. Montgomery, a 6-year-old German Riding Pony by Makuba out of a Holsteiner mare by Ratibor, earned 2009 USDF First Level Horse of the Year with an average score of 75.56%. This German Riding Pony is no half-pint either—at 16.3 hands, Montgomery exceeded his breeder's expectations in more ways than one!

Most Makuba babies out of small Warmblood mares finish in the 14.2–16 hand range, but genetics is never simple or predictable. "Montgomery's dam obviously had some pretty big genes," Biesenthal says, laughing. "That's one big pony!"

## Meet POPEYE

Natalie DiBerardinis is breeding and general manager of Hilltop Farm in Colora, Maryland, where the imported Westfalen pony stallion Popeye, owned by Summit Sport-horses, stands and books roughly 10–15 horse and pony mares per year. Popeye is sired by FS Pour l'Amour, champion of both his licensing and performance test, and sire of multiple Bundeschampionat winners. "We're lucky to have Popeye. He's a fantastic pony and is a little bit of a Napoleon! He can do anything; just ask him," DiBerardinis says.





And it seems he can. After earning his lifetime approval from the Oldenburg/ISR while still in Germany with a stallion index score of 227.5 points, which ranked him among the top 20 of all ISR/Oldenburg NA stallions (horses and ponies), Popeye went on to win 2007 Reserve Champion of the USDF/GAIG East Coast Stallion Final. He was a star in

the Westfalen breeding class at Dressage at Devon as well, winning with a score of over 80%, one of the highest of the entire weekend.

Popeye didn't stop with the breed shows though. He continued his winning ways through second level in 2008, winning the East Coast Pony Cup as well as multiple USDF All-Breeds awards. In 2009 he came out in the fall at third level with scores in the high 60s. Popeye's healthy self image was further reinforced when he was chosen as cover pony of the 2010 USEF Dressage Pony Handbook. Popeye is licensed for breeding with the ISR/Oldenburg, the Westfalen Verband and the RPSI.

"Popeye moves just like a Warmblood," DiBerardinis continues. "The German Riding Ponies are so horse-like in how they move and in their conformation, that if you don't have some perspective, or something to compare them to, they look just like horses. If you miss that he's 14.2 hands, you'd think he's just like any of our other stallions."

### Amateur APPEAL

"But where you see the pony is in the personality and rideability, as well as the hardiness. These ponies have good survival instincts, and they are just sensible." DiBerardinis agrees that the Americans riding German Riding Ponies are generally adult amateur women who have ridden the big horses much of their life and are ready for something a little closer to the ground. Mare owners booking to Popeye are choosing him either to downsize their big Warmblood mares, hoping to create that perfect-sized prospect for themselves down the road, or to complement their talented sport pony mares.

DiBerardinis credits Lendon Grey with helping put ponies on the dressage map in the United States thanks to her acclaimed FEI dressage ponies Seldom Seen and Last Scene. "No one's worked harder than Lendon in highlighting interest in dressage ponies in America," DiBerardinis says. "She proved that ponies can be competitive at the highest levels of dressage. And now we're proving that it's a mistake to limit ponies to child riders. Both children and adults can have real successes on these ponies and enjoy every minute along the way."

*"Rideability and character is the point. ...If you need a professional to train the pony so that your son or daughter can ride him, then what's the point?"*

### Getting ORGANIZED

Luckily, opportunities to show have expanded for dressage ponies in the United States in the last few years. While ponies are still excluded from CDI competitions such as the Olympics, any child or adult may compete a pony of any height in open dressage shows through Grand Prix level. And while Germany has long held separate Pony Championships, America is just recently following suit with the National Pony Cup held in Cincinnati, Ohio. The National Pony Cup, scheduled for July 29–August 1 of 2010, brings together ponies of all breeds and ages, and offers divisions for both juniors and adults as well as materiale and breed classes.

American registries are also jumping on the pony bandwagon. Our two largest German-parent based registries, the German Oldenburg Verband (GOV) and the Rheinland Pfalz-Saar International (RPSI), both have separate books for their breed's smaller cousins. The North American Sport Pony Registry and the International Sporthorse Registry (ISR) both register and brand German Riding Ponies. The Westfalen registry in the U.S. brings



in German judges to brand and inspect their ponies as well as horses. Finally, the Hanover Pony Registry also registers German Riding Ponies of Hanoverian descent in the United States, although they have no affiliation with the American Hanoverian Association.

Most Warmblood and riding pony breeding organizations in the U.S. now sanction the North American Stallion Test at Silver Creek Farm in Oklahoma as the official site of stallion 30 and 70 day tests, including a scaled-down version specifically for pony stallions, according to the official FN standards (Germany's equestrian association).

Otto Schalter, Stud Book director of the PRPS, the German parent organization for the Rheinland Pfalz-Saar International, claims that ponies are big business in Germany. He predicts that the market will continue to grow in America for both children and small adults.

"These ponies are just brilliant for small amateurs and kids," Schalter says. "One thing U.S. breeders will have to

watch out for, though, is that they keep in mind the pony standard for the future. It's lucky for U.S. breeders that the oversized ponies (14.3–15.3 hands) are so popular here in the states, because some will always overgrow whether you want them to or not! But U.S. kids will want to compete at an international level someday, and in those competitions, like in the pony hunter ring, 14.2 is finito.

"Rideability and character is the point. Otherwise, there's nothing worse," Schalter continues. "If you need a professional to train the pony so that your son or daughter can ride him, then what's the point?" He also adds, "We need to watch out with the ponies that their gaits don't become unrideable by children. We don't need the Weltmeyer gaits that wow everybody which nobody can ride."

## Breed DEVELOPMENT

"It takes time and generations to consistently produce ponies of a certain type, size, character and athletic ability," Schalter says. "In America, you have the Welsh ponies



and the good Thoroughbreds and Arabs as well as the small Warmblood mares. It is possible to build up a breed like the German Riding Pony this way, but it takes time."

"Some people think if you just crossbreed Welsh B with Thoroughbred, and again, cross that on Welsh B and Thoroughbred, that you eventually get to the riding pony. But without some care, this cross can go in any

direction," Schalter says. "You need a really good small Warmblood, or a Warmblood-Arab cross mare, and use a Welsh B stallion on her. And then you breed that resulting mare to one of the good German Riding Ponies in this country already, one with a good, strong mother line, and you are going in the right direction."

"Remember, there's still a fair bit of Welsh B in the German Riding Pony, pretty close up," Schalter says. "One of the more popular stallions in Germany was Constantin, who is pure Welsh B. He sired a good stallion now here in the United States as well—Chardonnay."

In Germany, the development of the German Riding Pony began nearly 50 years ago when the word pony was



nearly synonymous with Shetland, according to Bernhard Tschöepke, former judge and breeder of Welsh Cobs and honorary member of the PRPS verband in Germany.

"Interest was building

in those early days in developing a German breed of pony suitable for the sport disciplines," Tschöepke says. "Some early attempts were made crossing Haflinger with Arab or Thoroughbred. This was not too successful. They had a little better luck crossing the Dülmener, a native German pony, with Arabs, but still this was not really successful. And so they began bringing in the British ponies—the Welsh, mostly Section B's, the New Forest pony, as well as some Eastern European ponies, and crossing these with the Arabs and Thoroughbreds.



"People back then were very proud to own a purebred pony. The early German Riding Pony in our region was for people who didn't have enough money for a purebred, and the pony shows were for English-bred ponies only," Tschöepke continues. "The German Riding Pony had no shows or sport at first. But all this changed when people began to do sport with these ponies, and they won! Soon after that there were some high-scoring German Riding Ponies, and the breed just took off. All the societies embraced them.

"Over the years the societies established rules, and eventually the FN, which is like a governing minister, oversaw the books," Tschöepke explains. "The goal was to produce a real riding-type pony. And so it was agreed not to allow the cross of Haflinger or Fjord with the German Riding Pony. These breeds have their own books, and their own brands."

"It took many years to establish the studbooks and type for the German Riding Pony," according to Tschöepke. "First there was little or no Warmblood, and now there are pure Warmbloods in, and the German Riding Ponies are becoming more and more like little horses."



So where do you go to buy a German Riding Pony? They're becoming easier to find right here in America, and many registries can help connect buyers directly with pony breeders. Options in Germany abound with many districts offering top riding ponies at their traditional auctions. The popular Pony Forum sales in Germany are perfect if you'd like to see and try 30 or 40 sale ponies at one location and negotiate with silent bids within each pony's listed price category.

However you find the German Riding Ponies, or they find you, be aware that your riding life could change forever in a big way! These ponies tend to make a big impact on their owners of all ages. Next time you see a pony or cob with Warmblood type gaits at a dressage show, there's a good chance it's a GRP which, by the way, could also stand for Great Riding Partner. 