

Miniature Horses Enjoy A Surge in Popularity

BY ROBIN STANBACK

Diminutive though they may be in size, there is nothing small about the popularity enjoyed by the equine world's most minute ambassadors, Miniature horses. Standing no more than 38 inches for one registry and 32 inches or less for another, the Miniature horse is enjoying a surge in numbers to meet the demand of people who have fallen in love with this versatile and endearing equine.

The American Miniature Horse Association has seen an increase of over 5,500 horses registered in the past ten years from 2,578 horses in 1988 to 8,094 in 1997. Association manager Dan Prejean

said, "This is quite honestly the horse for everyone! From a tiny four-year-old child to an elderly retiree, anyone who loves horses can be involved with Miniature horses. They have such an even disposition and they are so easy to train and show that people just fall in love with them."

Miniature horses have been in demand for over 400 years in their capacity as prized possessions of royalty, circus performers, and as beasts of burden in the tight confinements of mines. The products of hundreds of years of selective breeding, Miniature horses are just that - horses. They are not dwarfs, and they are most certainly not ponies. The difference, according to Mr. Prejean, "is that ponies are a definite breed of their own. Proportionally, they tend to have slightly larger heads and feet than do horses. Obviously, dwarfs are a genetic anomaly and seldom look anatomically like a scaled-down version of a horse. I have seen dwarf miniature horses and they are truly tiny but not a perfect version of a horse. Miniatures have been bred selectively from their larger counterparts to be perfect, but small, horses. If you look out in a field of Miniature horses with no other field of reference like a human standing next to them or a yard stick, you would think you were looking at normal-sized horses."

Two registries have developed in the United States to accommodate breed enthusiasts. The American Miniature Horse Association based in Alvarado, Texas was formed in 1978 to aid and encourage the breeding, exhibiting, use and perpetuation of the American Miniature horse separate and apart from ponies and other small equines. The Association lists very specific guidelines for the breed. The horse must not exceed 34 inches in height measuring from the last hairs of the mane to the ground. Young horses from registered parents are issued temporary papers until they reach five years of age when permanent registration papers may be obtained. Mr. Prejean explained, "We began doing DNA test-

Pleasant Valley Rainbow, National Winner in roadster and conformation classes.



Photo submitted by May Howard

ing of all horses registered with us in 1996 so we can be certain that our pedigrees are as correct as is absolutely possible.”

The American Miniature Horse Registry based in Morton, Illinois is a part of the American Shetland Pony Club that was founded in 1888. The main difference between the registries is that of but four inches. In the American Miniature Horse Registry the maximum height is 38 inches. It is not uncommon for horses 34 inches and under to have a double registration which allows them the opportunity to show in horse shows sanctioned by either registry. Wee candidates for registration should, for both groups, be possessed of the correct conformation characteristics of most breeds of horses. They are to be small, well balanced, and sound. There are no coat or eye color restrictions. Miniature horses come in different types from fine-boned and delicate to a heavier “draft” style. The emphasis is on size, not breed type.

As different as the styles of Miniature horses, are the uses to which they can be put. A Miniature horse can make a “dandy” driving horse according to owner Nata Porter. “I’ve seen teams of Miniature horses pulling wagon carts and it is so adorable. You can also drive them in a single harness and there are shows all over the place that have classes just for these types,” she said. Classes for Miniature horses in harness include pleasure driving and roadster to bike classes, and there are also competitions designed to show how a tiny but bold horse can maneuver through obstacle courses, and over jumps in the hunter and jumper classes.

One of the most popular divisions in Miniature horse shows are the halter divisions where amateurs and professional horse enthusiasts can compete together. There are also specific halter classes designed for showmanship, youth and amateurs.

Competing in the show ring is the goal for many Miniature horse owners, but, for quite a few others, the pleasure of simply owning and enjoying a tiny equine is thrill enough. Ms. Porter said, “I love to show the horses, but I also very much enjoy just playing with them and watching them in the field. They have very kind temperaments and are a joy to care for.”

Just like larger equines, Miniature horses require regular veterinary, dental, and blacksmith care as well as a sound nutritional program. Along with a set vaccination schedule, a deworming program is equally important. Today many



Lightening Spot and Pete Huber of Huber's Miniatures

deworming products can be purchased over the counter at tack shops and feed stores but, on a cautionary note, it is important to know the correct weight of the horse prior to administering the dewormer. Dr. Fairfield Bain of the central Kentucky veterinary firm Hagyard-Davidson-McGee stated, “Consistently overdosing any horse with an anthelmintic preparation can be very detrimental to the animal. Repeated overdosing of deworming medications may cause liver damage and neurological disease.”

Dr. Rachel Pemstein, an equine veterinary consultant, also stressed the need for knowing the exact weight of the horse when she said, “For a standard-sized horse there are a number of ways to determine the accurate weight that do not involve using a scale. For Miniature horses these methods are not as accurate. Under- or overestimating the weight of a Miniature horse by 50 pounds can have a significantly higher impact than the same misjudgment on a standard-sized horse given that the amount could represent a fifth of the total weight of a Miniature horse. Many medications given once or infrequently might not have as serious an impact as the long-term use of some other medications. Antibiotics, which by necessity are often given over a period of several days, could cause serious gastric problems if given in inappropriate doses. Certainly, exact weights would be necessary when using anesthetics. (See accompanying article on Miniature horse weights on page 10.)

Dentistry and hoof care are equally as important in caring for Miniature horses as they are in larger equines, but they do present unique challenges to the dentist and the farrier. The tools that are used to work inside a larger

horse's mouth can be far too large for a smaller Miniature horse. One owner described holding his Miniature yearling stallion in the air as the blacksmith attempted to trim his feet. James Mitchell laughingly stated, "My blacksmith is a big guy and my colt was so tiny that the blacksmith was on his knees trying to trim the colt's feet. It didn't help that the colt's legs were so delicate and that he was not cooperating. I finally just picked him up and

horses than for their standard-sized counterparts. Mr. Prejean said, "Part of the beauty of owning a Miniature horse or a group of them is that you don't have to have a large space available for them. You can put a considerably larger number of Miniatures horses on five acres than you can larger horses." Ms. Porter added, "I can take my big horse stalls and put a partition down the center and have two Miniature horse stalls that are palatial for their occupants."

Tinker and Jim Damron redesigned their barn to accommodate their interest in Miniature horses by dividing up their larger horse stalls. "We had decided to get into breeding our Miniature horses and when we divided up our larger stalls we found that every one was a foaling stall for a small horse. They just don't take up any space at all," Mrs. Damron said.

The Damrons found breeding their tiny horses a joyful if slightly stressful hobby. Jim explained, "Everything is the same as a big horse, the whole teasing, breeding, waiting, and wondering thing except that it is very difficult to ultrasound for pregnancy at the very early stages. It is almost impossible to get the probe where you need it to search for the embryo. Also, if the mare has any difficulty foaling, as one of ours did, it is hard to get inside to help move a leg or reposition the foal. The end result is certainly worth the trouble, though. The first mare we foaled out had an 18-pound foal that we could cradle in

our arms like a baby. They are just unbelievable."

Unbelievable is one of the most used descriptions of the Miniature horse. In describing the interest the minute equines garnered at this year's Equitana, Mr. Prejean said, "There we were, surrounded by every kind of horse lover, leading our little Miniatures from the show rings to their stabling areas. The crowds parted when the people leading us through the area shouted, 'Horse coming through, make way.' People would turn around expecting to see a magnificent Friesian or a Clydesdale and they wouldn't see anything until they did a double take at our little horses. We had a crowd follow us back to the stalls every day. It was unbelievable." ☺☺



Mary Howard and Juliet of Petits Fours Miniatures

held him with his feet dangling so we could get his feet trimmed. No, I don't recommend this method, but it worked at the time."

Miniature horses have the same nutritional needs as larger equines but obviously on a much smaller scale. The American Miniature Horse Association suggests, "Miniature horses will normally require a daily ration of about one pound of grain per 100 pounds of body weight. Two feedings are the daily minimum when feeding grain to Miniatures because of the size of their intestinal tract and the need for continual movement of food through the system. Pasture access must be limited when grass is long and lush or founder may result."

It is considerably easier and less expensive to provide stabling and pasture space for diminutive