

FELL PONY TEMPERAMENT & MATURITY

Compiled by *The Fell Pony Society*

Our Patron: Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II



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TEMPERAMENT

The Fell temperament is similar to other British native pony breeds in that the instinct for survival has been bred into them for centuries. Because of this, Fells can provide a challenge to the inexperienced or unwary person.

Intelligence, curiosity, stamina, self-reliance, energy, responsibility and mischievousness can all be attributes of a Fell, which can pose unique challenges. If Fells are bred and reared OFF their traditional hills, their survival instinct may perhaps fade, but for the time being it runs strong in their veins and it must be allowed for.

Sensible horse training still applies but in the case of the Fell you may want to keep the following in mind:

- When working with a Fell you need to have a cooperative and partnership mentality.
- The Fell's survival instinct may mean you will get some unique reactions.
- Fell are naturally muscular and powerful. No human has the physical strength to overcome a Fell pony in a disagreement. Stronger bits and physical measures are generally counterproductive and it is necessary to outsmart Fell ponies and not attempt to dominate them. Like many intelligent horses and ponies Fell ponies make great partners but will resist any efforts to push them into a subservient position.
- DON'T BORE THEM with too much schooling. Ten minutes for a young Fell is plenty - and young means under seven years. If they get bored, they will invent things to make life more exciting. You may not appreciate their inventions.
- Fells need to be kept busy and engaged. They are bred for hard work and are not meant to be 'lawn-ornaments'. Like many working dog breeds they have been bred over time for a specific purpose and those purchasing one must realize this fact.
- Focus OUTWARD on a job you can both do, not inward on the faults you may think you perceive.
- Some British breeders believe that early handling of Fell foals is not necessarily always desirable. Their experience has been that unhandled animals will struggle, accept the dominance that is shown by humans, and accept it from then on. In comparison, they have found that a Fell which becomes a

“petted foal” is not truly “a horse” in its own mind. These foals can be hard to train because they don’t accept human dominance easily – they may ‘go along with’ human wishes but break out later. (Please also see the first paragraph below in the ‘Maturity’ section).

Not all Fells are for children or timid riders – don’t assume. Like all equines some are appropriate and some are not. Fells of any age are very likely to test a new rider. This trait is linked to a strong sense of responsibility. When they are totally in charge (like with the very young, or the disabled) their minds are engaged and they are very trustworthy. But when they are not sure if the rider (driver/handler) is really wise enough to be trusted to take over, there is a battle of wills - they won't give up control to someone whose judgement they don't respect. It has nothing to do with physical strength, bribery or coercion, just superior judgement and decision making.

MATURITY

The Fell pony breed matures late – not until seven years of age. In this it resembles the other British native ponies and such European breeds as the Lipizzaner. Most Fells in their native country are left to run free until the age of two or three. In the 1980s and 90s it has been common practice for horse trainers in the Eden Valley to take on a two year old from the fell in its third autumn, handle it, halter break it and mouth it, and accustom it to having a surcingle or breaking roller around its girth. Then it is turned away onto the fell or an allotment with other ponies, to grow on and mature in natural surroundings with its family as company, and without further handling. The early training is not overdone, but it is never forgotten by the pony.

Saddle training will be done when the pony is rising four, or sometimes later. It is light training only; standing, walking, trotting straight lines or making big circles to either hand, short canters under a light rider, no changes of leg except through the walk or trot and without much bending of the spine. Work in any small arena should be very short at this age so sharp turns are kept to a minimum.

Harness training is equally simple in its aims, though naturally it is more complex to undertake due to the greater amount of equipment and "tackle" which the pony is required to accept. Light driving helps to expose ponies to a wealth of experiences without too much stress on their backs and leg joints.

If breaking, training, or riding is done too early irreversible damage may be done to still developing bones, joints, and musculoskeletal system. Such damage will not be immediately evident but the pony may develop arthritic conditions in its early teens, which is rarely the case with a pony trained slowly from the start. Once a pony has been taught the basics it does no harm to leave him till five, six or more years old before demanding hard work from him; he can then go on working, sound, doing steady work into his thirties if he is not stressed in youth.

Although accidental breedings are always a possibility it is recommended that Fell mares not be bred until they are at least three years of age, otherwise irreparable damage may be done to internal organs, reproductive organs and may restrict the mare’s own growth and maturity.

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