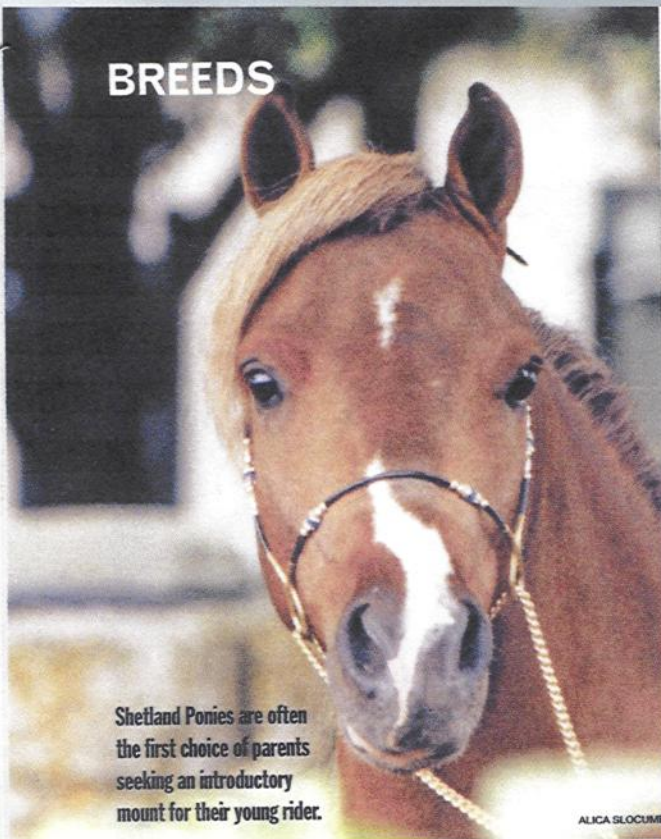


BREEDS



Shetland Ponies are often the first choice of parents seeking an introductory mount for their young rider.

ALICA SLOCUM

Ponies First

Many of today's top riders started out with Shetland Ponies, popular first mounts for ranch-raised children and one-horse families.

By Heidi Nyland

Lynn Palm and Stacy Westfall started aboard Shetland Ponies. Read on to learn why these trainers recommend ponies for pint-sized riders and what to look for when buying a child's first mount.

Show and the All American Quarter Horse Congress. With her brothers, she breeds and trains Quarter Horses at the family's Fort Collins, Colorado, facility.

Pony Start: "My mom thought her pretty little girl needed a pretty little pony," Margo remembers with a laugh. Although the family was known for their Quarter Horses—they stood three stallions and owned acreage in Cañon City, Colorado—the Balls headed to an auction to buy a Shetland Pony for their

Mention Shetland Ponies at an equestrian gathering, and you'll most likely hear stories about childhood horseback adventures. Ponies summon memories of playing cowboys-and-Indians and training willing mounts to perform Hollywood-style tricks. Thanks to western-themed 1950s and '60s television shows depicting Gene Autry, The Lone Ranger, Roy Rogers and other cinematic cowboys horseback, many youths were prompted to mount up. Not surprisingly, many of today's top horsemen and -women started riding when they were young and when their legs were quite short. Classic Shetland Ponies, known for their child-friendly size, were their perfect first mounts.

Here, five of today's top trainers and clinicians share their pony stories. Although they now own and raise full-sized Paint and Quarter Horses, Margo Ball, Julie Goodnight, Terry Myers,

The Confidence-Builder

Top Rider: Margo Ball holds five world-championship titles and her American Quarter Horse Association judge's card. She judges top events, such as the AQHA World



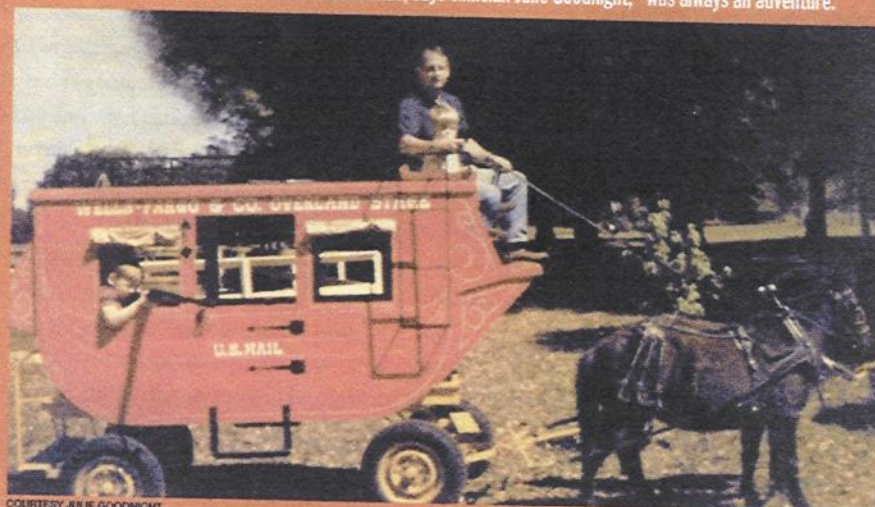
COURTESY MARGO BALL

Colorado trainer Margo Ball recalls that her Shetland "was actually more challenging than my first horse. His disposition kept me on my toes."



HEIDI NYLAND

Taking a Shetland out for a solo ride, says clinician Julie Goodnight, "was always an adventure."



COURTESY JULIE GOODNIGHT

youngest child. Silver King was a long name for 2 1/2-year-old Margo to pronounce; in *Mr. Ed* fashion, she simply called him "Wilbur." (Wilbur was the name of the character who owned Mr. Ed, a TV-show palomino.)

Margo's older brothers, Wayne and Tom, started riding on the family's Quarter Horses. With her brothers in charge, Margo rode Wilbur all over the family's property. Even with supervision, Margo and Wilbur found their share of mischief.

"I remember falling off when I was 3," Margo says. "I rode Wilbur through a gate; he spotted the barn and ran straight to it. I actually stayed on three-quarters of the way, and then I got scared and just let go. Mother took me to the doctor just to be safe, but I was fine. I was up and riding again the next day."

Brother Wayne rode Wilbur to keep him listening and responsive for his sister. At age 15, Wayne showed off his training and riding progress when he rode Wilbur to a grand-championship title at the county fair.

"That was a big deal," Margo remembers. "Plus, the win caused a little tension between my mother and her best friend. We bought Wilbur at a sale and won with him; my mother's best friend raised Shetland Ponies and didn't place as well."

When it was time for Margo to show in 4-H and Quarter Horse shows, she stepped up to a taller horse — a 3-year-old, 15.3-hand gelding named Yukon Jim.

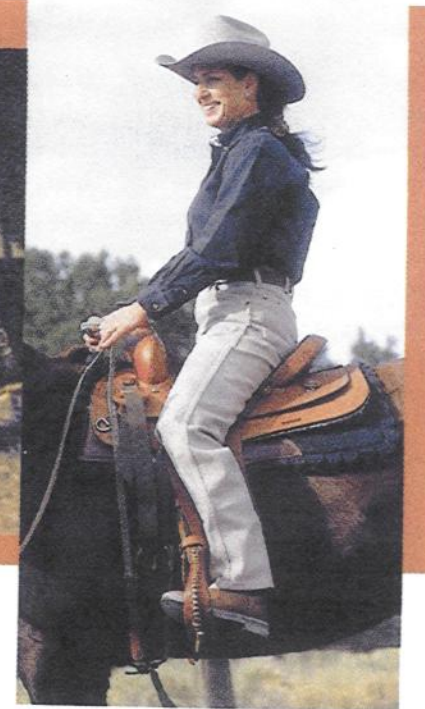
"It was quite a change going from a Shetland to a horse who was so tall, and one who had such a bouncy trot!" she says. "Still, I always took care of Wilbur and kept him as a pet."

First Lessons: Margo traces her confidence with horses to her early work with Wilbur. "He made me confident," she says. "The Shetland was actually more challenging than my first horse. His (Wilbur's) disposition kept me on my toes. I wouldn't change having had him first."

The Memory-Makers

Top Rider: Julie Goodnight trains horses and riders through her Goodnight Training Stables in Salida, Colorado. She's a well-known clinician and a master instructor and program director with the Certified Horsemanship Association, an organization helping to teach riding safety to horsemanship coaches.

Pony Start: Julie's dad, Earl Downs, remembers his daughter's early love for horses — and picking out her first Shetland Ponies at a Florida county fair. While 4-year-old Julie watched children take pony rides, Earl inter-



viewed the owner. The pony peddler convinced Earl, already an expert horse trader, that ponies would be a great investment.

"I ordered two ponies," Earl remembers. "When they didn't have the personality traits I thought would be suitable for my daughters, I asked the trainer to pick them up. We kept looking and found full siblings that looked like twins: 'Cracker' and 'Cricket.'"

With the right ponies at home, he collected all the gear needed to ride and drive the team. After a visit to San Francisco's Wells Fargo museum, Earl knew there was another piece of pony gear he had to have.

"We saw an original red-and-gold-striped stagecoach," he says. "I wanted to have a pony-scale stagecoach. I got a set of rough plans and recreated them to scale. The mini stage had windows with canvas curtains, leather seats and leather straps, real doors, leaf springs and old-style brakes. We traveled many miles with the stagecoach filled with children and with Cracker and Cricket looking like a miniature draft-horse team. Then again, we ended many rides with children we didn't know, and

would have to retrace our ride to find where they lived."

Julie remembers the stagecoach rides and her father's unique sense of humor.

"We'd tear through the woods," she says. "Every time my father drove under a low branch, he'd say, 'Quack, quack,' and we'd all yell, 'Duck!'"

When the ponies weren't hooked up to the stagecoach, Julie and her sisters rode them through the family's orange groves and pastures. Julie remembers some wild rides.

"Taking one out for a solo spin was always an adventure," she says. "I remember several rides where it was all I could do to get the pony out of

the barnyard. Once I got him out, he'd play nasty little tricks, such as rubbing me off on tree trunks or under low branches. Most of the time I stayed on, and eventually, I got the upper hand."

First Lessons: Julie was 8 when she stepped up to ride "Minnie," a Morgan mare she had until she was 14. The lessons she learned while riding Cracker and Cricket carried over to her taller mount.

"The mare was easier to ride than the ponies, especially after what they taught me in the 'school of hard knocks,'" Julie says. "Having survived the ponies, a horse seemed relatively easy — once I learned to scale the fence to get on."

The Fun-Providers

Top Rider: Terry Myers' horses have earned national-championship acclaim through the American Paint Horse Association and the Pinto Horse Association. Terry presents his Ride-in-

Sync clinics throughout the country and at his Ostrander, Ohio, training center.

Pony Start: Terry's parents offered him and his siblings a choice — Shetland Ponies or bicycles. The family lived on a 900-acre grain and cattle farm in Greenville, Ohio, but equines were a new venture. Terry, then 4, and his brother voted to add ponies to the property. Their votes squelched their sister's plan for a bike.

Terry remembers the pony he chose.

"Rusty" happened to be the cheapest and the meanest," he says of the gray-and-white pinto. "He was still a stud pony and had lots of energy. He took us all for a ride, but he did everything we asked. He pulled a bobsled, we rode him in parades, we took him to horse shows, raced him — I even chased my grandpa's cows when no one was looking."

As they learned to ride, Terry and his siblings tied Rusty to a stake in the yard and rode him around in circles.

"He lived in his saddle all day, and we'd get on and ride a few laps whenever we passed by," Terry remembers. "We just kept moving the stake around the yard to keep the grass mowed."

Later, Terry and his neighborhood

buddies raced their ponies through the cornfields and along paths his grandpa mowed around the fields. No one helped train the ponies, but they were ridden constantly.

"There were days when we'd disappear for 10 to 12 hours," Terry remembers. "You can't help but develop some kind of communication with the ponies when you spend that much time together. We expected a lot from them and they were willing — most of the time."

First Lessons: Terry credits Rusty for teaching him balance and perseverance. He gained con-



HEIDI RYLAND



COURTESY TERRY MYERS

As a child, Ohio trainer Terry Myers spent many hours aboard a Shetland. "We expected a lot from them," he says, "and they were willing — most of the time."

fidence after many long rides, countless falls and a few broken bones.

"I was fearless," Terry admits. "We had fun and played so much and did anything we wanted. When I did fall, it wasn't too far down. I did have four broken ribs and a broken leg. The broken leg didn't stop me from riding, though. I just tied my crutches to the saddle and rode off to the woods."

Terry stepped up to ride a gaited Saddlebred when he was 12. Soon after, he started colts and competed on contest horses. After many hours in the saddle and lots of bumpy rides, the taller horses were no problem.

"It didn't seem like a transition," he says. "I had fallen off so much by that time that it didn't matter."

The Patience-Teachers

Top Rider: Lynn Palm helps educate riders from around the world through her Palm Partnership Training. The horsewoman also has proven herself in the show pen, winning four Superhorse titles at the AQHA World Show.

Pony Start: Raised in Sarasota, Florida, Lynn watched her neighborhood friends ride their ponies up and down the dirt roads. Her family had space for a horse—five acres to be exact—but had never owned a four-hoofed beast.

"I'm from a non-horsey family," Lynn explains. "I begged and begged for a pony and convinced my parents to buy one when I was 7. Of course, I picked out the one that was pregnant, so I soon had two ponies."

Lynn's first Shetland Pony, "Sugar," had a filly with an equally sweet moniker—"Honey."

"We weren't really set up for horses.

"I begged and begged for a pony and convinced my parents to buy one when I was 7," says Florida trainer Lynn Palm. "Of course, I picked out the one that was pregnant, so I soon had two ponies."



COURTESY LYNN PALM

We thought we could just tie her out on a rope or to a tree," Lynn says, laughing.

Lynn was solely responsible for her ponies.

"It was my thing to do, but my parents were wonderful to support my interest," she says. Her parents helped out when Hurricane Donna landed on Florida's west coast. Lynn was terrified that the ponies would be hurt outside in the rain and wind. She convinced her parents to help "save" her Shetlands by housing them in the garage.

"We started bringing the ponies to the house, but they got away from us and ran down the road," Lynn remembers. "I was knee-deep in water. We finally got them in the garage, but my parents weren't happy with me. I know now the ponies might've been better off outside."

Her ponies were soon safe and sound—and ready to compete. Lynn trained her ponies with help from a neighboring instructor, Bobbie Steele. After watching Bobbie ride, Lynn was asked to help out at the picture-perfect training stable. Lynn rode full-sized horses at Bobbie's, then applied her lessons to her ponies. With help from Bobbie, Lynn trained

CAPPY JACKSON



her ponies to show in 4-H and to compete in sulky races. As a teen, Lynn was the only girl competing at Tampa's tracks.

First Lessons: Lynn credits Sugar and Honey for teaching her responsibility and patience. "My parents weren't going to get me that pony unless I took care of it," she remembers. "I also learned to be patient. If I wanted to teach one of the ponies something, I had to practice and be patient until we both learned."

The lessons Lynn learned early helped her at age 10 when she stepped up to her first taller mount, a Quarter-type gelding named Cracker. Lynn put her lessons of patience into play when training Cracker to pick up his right lead.

"It wasn't strange to ride Cracker," Lynn says. "I was thankful and proud of all my horses. Cracker wasn't very well-schooled, but he was nice and quiet. There were lots of tears there and lots of lessons to get the right lead. I got through it, but it took lots of patience."

Shetland Ponies: Breed Basics

The American Shetland Pony Club registered its first ponies in 1888. The ponies, first imported from Scotland, have long been known for their size (all ponies qualifying for registration are under 46 inches), stamina and easy-keeping qualities. The ponies can be any color.

To date, the breed's registry has tallied 150,000 ponies and has 7,500 members. Three thousand of those members are youths. The ASPC has expanded to include separate breeds: the Classic American Shetland Pony and the Modern American Shetland Pony.

Classic Shetlands trace their roots to the Shetland Islands and date back to the 700s. Importers shipped the ponies to the United States in the early 1800s for use in coal mines. The breed's lines survive today and are closely related to modern Shetlands.

Modern Shetlands combine Classic qualities with traits from other pony types. They're bred to have long, shapely necks, light bone structures and spirited personalities. Their high-stepping gaits make them stand out in the show ring, where they compete in halter, roadster, harness and pleasure-driving classes as well as youth's hunter, pleasure riding and gymkhana classes. In 2006, the ASPC will add yet another Shetland division for half-Shetlands. The new division, National Show Ponies, will allow ponies up to 14.2 hands.

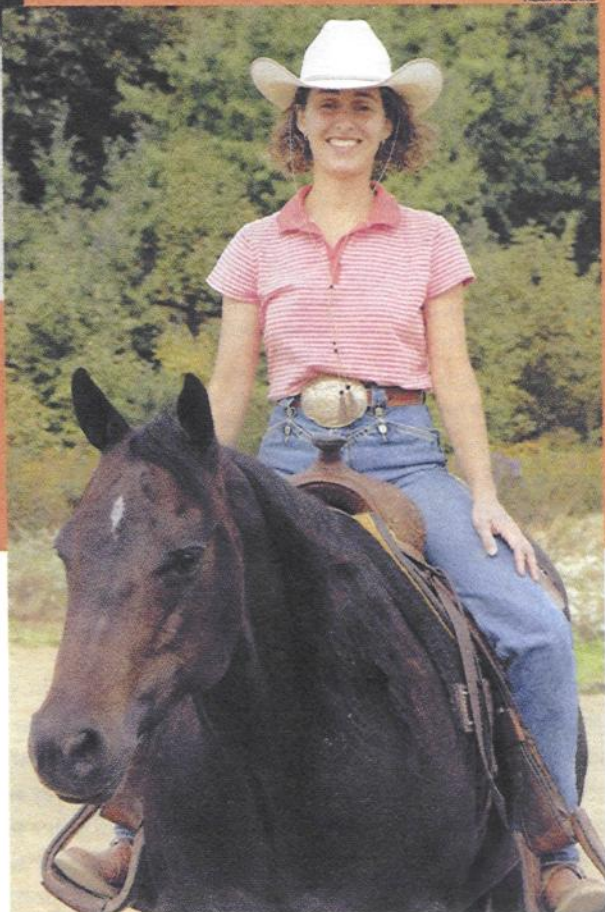
The ASPC works to make showing affordable for youths. Youth membership is just \$10, a one-time fee covering membership expenses until each youth's 18th birthday. Youths and adults can show Shetland Ponies in almost any discipline, choosing from barrel racing and show jumping to driving and halter competitions. Each year, the Shetland Congress, held in Gifford, Illinois, draws hundreds of ponies.

COURTESY STACY WESTFALL



Reining-horse trainer Stacy Westfall was 6 when she and her brother purchased a Shetland, Misty, from some family friends. "My mom actually learned to ride on Misty when she was young," she says.

HEIDI NYLAND



The Perfect Teacher

Top Rider: Stacy Westfall awed judges and audiences during the 2004 National Reining Horse Association Futurity freestyle competition

when she rode Can Can Lena without a bridle and to a win. Now, Stacy leads clinics and trains reiners from Westfall Training Center in Mt. Gilead, Ohio.

Pony Start: Stacy was 6 years old when she and her brother pooled their money to buy a Shetland Pony named Misty. The pony cost just one penny, but the siblings each chimed in a cent—upping the price to two cents.

"We both wanted to pay," Stacy remembers with a smile. "Our family friends owned the pony and were looking for a good home for her. What's more, my mom actually learned to ride on Misty when she was young."

Misty had visited many homes looking for the right caring owners. When Stacy's mom inquired about the pony, the owners were excited to find just the right place. It wasn't that Misty was ill-mannered, but she had a special trick that scared some families too much.

"She'd been taught to rear when you pulled back on the reins and kicked," Stacy remembers. "She didn't abuse it, but I think other kids had too much fun rearing up all the time."

Trick riding wasn't a problem for Stacy. She was eager to teach the pony more.

"I wanted to learn to jump," she remembers. "My mom would put a board across pop cans, and Misty and I would sail over. The next time we approached, Misty balked. We had our work cut out."

Misty did have a few bad habits that required retraining. For instance, when Stacy cantered her through the fields, she'd stop quickly to grab a patch of grass.

"She'd screech to a halt and put her head down, sending me sliding down her neck," Stacy recalls. "It was a hard landing."

First Lessons: "Misty was the per-

fect teacher," Stacy says. "If you were a beginner, she could sense that, and would be willing and easy. She'd help you gain confidence. Then after a number of rides, she'd test you. The tests came when you thought you knew what you were doing."

With her mom's careful teaching, Stacy learned perseverance from Misty. Even if Stacy was ready to give up, she had to push through and accomplish the lesson at hand.

"Mom would get on her occasionally for training sessions, but usually she'd just coach us through," Stacy recalls. "She wouldn't let me quit until I'd won the battle. By the time I got my full-sized horse, I had a lot of experience from Misty. We always said that if you'd passed all of Misty's tests, you could ride anything."

Professional Pony Advice

Horsemanship instructors agree that pairing a child with a pony can help the youngster gain confidence and learn to cue properly – and in the correct place. Shetland Ponies often match young riders' sizes. What's more, young riders can learn important grooming and horse-care skills while working with their first Shetland mounts.

"A 5-year-old can't groom a full-sized horse well, but can learn handling with a pony that he's more comfortable with," Margo advises. "Now, I see trainers' kids ride their ponies around at the big-horse shows. The kids have fun while their parents are busy training and showing. Meanwhile, the kids are taking care of the ponies."

American Shetland Pony Club

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They can hop on and have fun without the show pressure."

Julie understands the value of teaching a young rider atop a pony that's size-proportionate.

"I think it's really valuable to start with a small pony if you're little," she says. "Your body is in proportion to the animal's, allowing your leg to come two-thirds or more of the way down the pony's barrel. That helps develop good legs from the beginning. Also, the pony's width allows the small rider to sit normally, without her legs sticking out to the side."

Stacy recommends proportional ponies for youths, but suggests finding a well-trained pony.

"I can see where if they weren't properly trained, they could be stubborn little things," she says with a sigh.

Terry offers similar advice.

"Find a pony that's safe and quiet – preferably one that's been trained by a small adult rather than a child. If you're looking for a Shetland Pony for your child, ask about its bloodlines. Make sure the sire and dam are known for their calm temperaments."

Margo recommends lots of adult supervision and little pampering to keep your pony well-mannered.

"Children on ponies need adult supervision as they'd have with any horse," she advises. "They need to be treated like a full-sized horse. There's a tendency to pamper them and let them get away with things. You wouldn't do that with a big horse."

"Riding a Shetland Pony is a great way to start," she says. "Think about suitability when you shop. There are so many professionals who can help you find a pony that matches your child's personality and size. Whether you're looking for a horse or a pony, suitability is most important. The pony's mind has to be good. I like my horses to be laid back. With proper selection and continued guidance, you can find a pony that's fun and willing."

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