

Pony Conformation

text and photos by Judy Wardrope

In previous columns, we've looked at functional conformation for sport horses in various disciplines, but do the same things apply to sport ponies? Many things do apply and yet there are degrees of difference.

First of all, pony riders are predominantly children, usually inexperienced, or beginners. If we want to develop soft, giving hands in these riders, a pony that is light on the forehand will make that task easier. Small children and riders

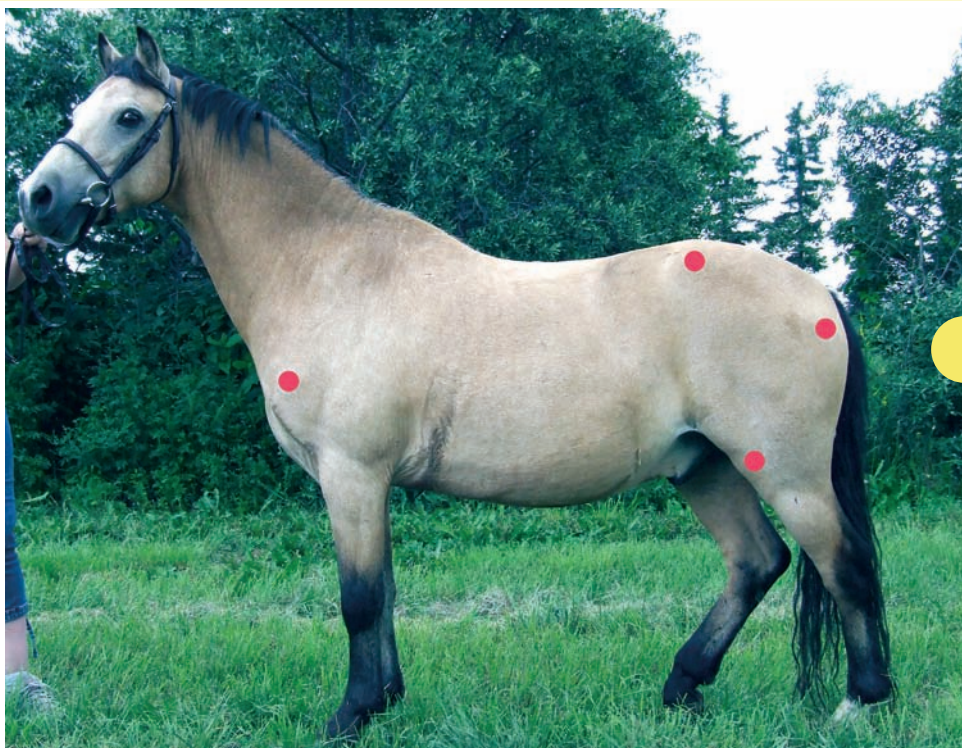
who have yet to develop a good seat are at a real disadvantage on a pony that is heavy on the forehand or has a lot in front of his pillar of support.

Secondly, how many children or beginners can stay on a pony with the equivalent of grand prix power either on the flat or over fences? A pony with the ability to transfer all the power it generates may pop the young rider out of the tack.

Thirdly, a pony built to have a shorter

stride behind than in front will tend to compensate by dwelling in the air with the hindquarters. The resultant bouncing can be extremely difficult to ride, especially for young or inexperienced riders, as it pitches the rider forward.

And then there's the issue of being built to do the job well enough that it does not adversely affect disposition. How can you encourage a young rider to continue in the horse industry if their first experiences are not enjoyable?



PONY #1

Pony #1 is a great example of too much power for most pony riders. His rear triangle (point of hip, point of buttock, stifle, point of hip) is nearly equilateral and his stifle is well below the level of his sheath - jumper traits. His lumbosacral joint (LS) is perfectly in line from point of hip to point of hip, which lets him transfer all his power, but, he's a bit heavy in front of his pillar of support, which means he will need to use more effort to lift it. His short humerus and high point of shoulder allow him to get his front end up quickly, so he'd be in big demand in the

jumper ring if he measured four hands taller than the 12.1 hands he does measure. He easily jumps courses of 3'6" and could go higher, but, as it is, he needs a good rider to stay with him over a 3' fence. He likes to work but is less tolerant of inexperienced riders, who tend to be rocketed forward in response to his power. Because he uses so much power due to the amount of front end to lift, things can quickly become very uncomfortable for both pony and rider. His name, appropriately enough, is Buckle Up and he's 11 years old.



PONY #2

Pony #2 has an LS just slightly back of ideal on a horse, but in this case, it is within the width of two fingers and functional when the rest of her conformation is considered. Her stifle placement (well below the level of the sheath on a male horse) gives her scope, and, although she has been a jumper for nearly two decades, she would probably have been a very good eventer. She is light in front of her pillar of support and has a lovely high point of shoulder – both contribute to her ability and her longevity in performance. Three of the Southern grandchildren – Kelly Koss, Ben Asselin and Ron Heathcott - have ridden her from her base at Spruce Meadows. She is a very good example of a nice pony for learning to ride (on the flat or over fences) and her name is Merci.

PONY #4

Pony #4 should grow up to be really good child's jumper or eventer. He will have enough scope due to his low stifle placement yet will not rocket his rider out of the tack. He will be delightfully light in the forehand and able to snap his front legs up out of the way. He has very little in front of his pillar of support, has a short and well-angled humerus – not hunter movement or form, but great for jumping or eventing. He will have a fair amount of knee action on the flat, but he'll be efficient over a fence. His name is Alec and he's still a weanling. To prove that pedigree isn't everything, he's also a full brother to Pony #3.



PONY #3

Pony #3 is interesting to analyze. His LS appears to be just back of ideal but within a functional range. His ilium is the short side of his rear triangle, a dressage trait, but his stifle is too far below his sheath for sustained collection. When we look at the forequarters, we see that he has quite a bit in front of his pillar of support and that he has a lower point of shoulder. He would likely argue about working off his hindquarters for any length of time, but would display hunter form over fences. He could be a bit heavy in a child's hands if not trained to lift his neck without tipping his nose up. He could work as a driving pony; however, his long humerus coupled with the low stifle placement means that he wouldn't move like the proverbial sewing machine. He'll have a long stride, which should be an advantage in open hunter classes if not punished in the mouth for raising his head. His name is Eclipse and he's a three-year-old.

The pillar of support can be determined from the side view by drawing a line through the middle of the near forelimb straight up through the top of the horse. The more horse in front of this line, the heavier it is on the forehand.