

THE NEW ZEALAND SPORT PONY SCENE

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The New Zealand pony scene has been dominated by the show pony breeders for many decades. Societies existed mainly for show ponies and conformation is/was mainly judged by show pony breeders and judges.

This has led to some sport/performance pony breeders feeling unsatisfied as the show pony is usually of a slightly different conformation than the sport pony. The sport pony often has a stronger bone structure and more muscles, which are considered rather undesirable by many show pony judges. Heavier boned ponies often do not win at in-hand or ridden shows over their dainty, finer counterparts.

Thankfully, the showing circles have opened up during the past years by introducing show hunter pony rings and tests. The first year the North Island All Breeds Show offered a show hunter pony in-hand class, the ring was full, actually double the number of entries than the show pony ring.

A number of people entered ponies that normally would not be shown in a public pony class at all as they have never had a chance of winning. An influx of Connemara crosses, Kaimanawa (NZ native pony), Welsh crosses and other breeds under 148cm, were among the competitors.

Since then the show hunter type pony has slowly reserved itself a place in most main shows and many people have become interested in breeding this type of pony. The name show hunter comes from the Australian and English description. In Europe these ponies are called sport ponies. In some circles, the sport pony or show hunter pony is also called a warmblood type pony as it looks like a smaller version of a warmblood. As we all know, the warmblood is a type rather than a breed itself and so the comparison is actually a very good one.

The NZ pony breeding societies have also slowly opened up for the show hunter type pony, particularly the Pony Breeders Society, as some of their members recognised that the bigger cousin of the show pony requires a home, too. Some show ponies also perform very well in the performance circuit, such as ponies bred under the prefixes Westwood, Kirkwood, Apsley, Dragonwyck and Greenlee (and others). In these instances, it is hard to distinguish between the sport pony and the show pony. Show ponies and sport ponies are more and more competing against each other and are bred with each other, so the end result might well be a more homogenous, slightly stronger boned, but very showy and elegant pony type in future years to cater for heavier teenage riders or lightweight adults (just as their German or Dutch counterparts do).

Jody Hartstone, well known international dressage rider, was the first to bring up the registration of warmblood typed ponies with the Warmblood Association of New Zealand. Jody had leased the imported sport pony sire, Davidoff, for two seasons and initiated his licensing and registration three years ago. Since then the Warmblood Society has appended its studbook and added the Warmblood Pony Registry to it. Davidoff's progeny are eligible for registration. This move was a good start for the sport or warmblood pony.

There have always been excellent sport ponies competing in New Zealand, but many breeders did not register their stock. In some instances, the pony breeding societies were not helpful when it came to the heavier boned pony type.

The offspring were sold by stud name, such as Ridgewood. Ridgewood ponies mainly stemmed from the Arabian sire, Shareef (owned

by the Cook family), and are still known as outstanding showjumpers.

There were other well known sires, for example, Golddust who were known through word of mouth, but unfortunately, the value of these lines got a bit lost by not recording the ponies and monitoring their whereabouts. This clearly is the disadvantage of not registering stock.

Due to New Zealand's dressage riders going overseas and competing at high levels nowadays, teenagers have become very interested in training dressage as well. This move is slowly changing the landscape of pony breeding as these teenagers require ponies that are suitable for this discipline. Additionally, they want a pony that can jump and event as well.



Daveedo (Davidoff/Ridgewood mare)

Showing is still important for many younger children to learn the basics of horse care and manners in the ring. Showing can be a very valuable experience, but many children grow out of it and move on to a more 'adventurous' equestrian discipline, such as showjumping, or want to excel in more difficult dressage tests.

Thankfully, more and more overseas dressage trainers visit or move to Australasia and offer high quality training. There is still a lot to be done, but the first steps have been taken.

In Mid November 2006, a show hunter/sport pony, Buckton Dominoff (by Davidoff, out of Corona's Dreamgirl) won the Supreme Champion Ridden Pony title at the Royal Show in Christchurch under an English judge.

This event signals that the doors are open for the formerly 'poor cousin' of the dainty show pony. The future for the sport pony nationally, and internationally, is bright.

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Buckton Dominoff