

THE NEW FOREST PONY IN THE SHOW RING

As the ponies first enter the ring the first thing that I notice is the movement. Most Forest ponies have very good, free, straight movement.

At walk I look for a good length of stride with a pony using its hind leg well to track up and using its front leg from the shoulder not just from the elbow.

At trot I expect to see the hind leg being brought well under the body giving elevation and impulsion with the foreleg again moving freely through the shoulder. The action should be rounded and not the low so called 'daisy cutting' movement. This is essential in the Forest pony as trying to negotiate the rough terrain of the Forest moors safely would be impossible with the flat exaggerated show pony action.

In ridden classes the canter is a pace that seems to come naturally to Foresters. They normally seem to be naturally happy at this pace and I look for a rounded collected canter that covers the ground. Ponies that are over-bitted or that have been moved into a double too quickly can often have a short rather choppy stride that seems to be going "down hill" and with their heads bent to their chests so they lose their fronts. This is a real pity and I have been disappointed by the canter of many really nice ponies and I feel it has more to do with the production than the natural pace of the pony, but a judge can only judge what they see on the day.

Foresters can really gallop and it is nice to see them show what they can do when the ring conditions allow. A well-executed gallop and a calm obedient slow down to a square halt can be a class winner especially when others only do what can be described as a fast unbalanced canter.

Having taken in how the ponies are moving, the conformation is next to be assessed. I start to judge the pony from the ground up. I like to see bone in proportion to the height of the pony, short canon bones and well defined knees and hocks. The forelimbs should be straight, with well developed fore arms and the knees large and flat. The cannon bone should be flat and broad when seen from the side. The hind limbs should have well developed second thighs, well let down, clearly defined hocks that are neither too straight nor curved. Ponies with round coarse bone may look to be strong but in my experience the flat hard well defined bone give fewer problems and splints. Round open feet are desirable. Flat feet can lead to a myriad of problems as can small contacted feet.

Having first looked at the limbs I then look at the rest of the pony. A pony should have a good length of neck, a good sloping shoulder, a depth of body that is equal to the length of leg, a strong back and with a nice length of quarter.

Foresters were bred as multi-purpose animals equally at home in a trap or pulling out timber as being a riding pony so they can be rather flat across the withers. This should not be penalised as long as the shoulder is sloping and has good length.

The question of type can be very difficult with Forest Ponies. With a height variation of between 10.2hh, the smallest I know, to the full 148cms, 14.2hh and a varied colour range you can be surprised by the differences between the ponies in the ring

at one time. The smallest ponies are still recognized as a 'large breed' and can have to compete against the 'heavies' i.e. Welsh Cobs, Dales, Fells and Highlands, especially in junior ridden classes. This can cause problems and can tend to make some say that the little Foresters look fine and lacking in type. However the small ponies are generally excellent performers and suit the talented smaller rider, and often show more quality. The larger ponies can occasionally lose type by becoming 'horsey'.

Longer cannon bones and the rather straight long head does not appeal. A really wonderful example of the larger pony that has kept type is Fijal Prelude, 4 times supreme champion at our breed show. This lovely mare, deep through the body, with a well laid shoulder, powerful quarters and hind leg, quality flat bone and good sized knees and hocks could never be mistaken for any other breed.

Condition can also play an important part in show ring success. Too much weight however, can be so harmful especially to young stock where the extra wear and tear on joints caused by carrying too much weight can do irreparable damage. Heavy loaded shoulders that prevent free movement are not to be encouraged, and although it is certainly true that fat can help to hide many faults it is important that judges don't reward such ponies.

Finally manners!! Very important in the breed. Ponies trained to walk and trot well beside their handler can show themselves better than ponies that have to be reluctantly dragged or those that are towing their leader around the ring. We are justly proud of the temperament of our ponies. Bad behavior should not be tolerated and the Breed Society has added the recommendation to their panel judges that bad manners should be heavily penalised.

Gill Wright