

Bringing Up Baby

By Mary Jean Gould-Earley, MD

The Fell pony population continues to grow in North America, primarily through the breeding and selling of youngstock, which comprise the current majority. As new owners are anxious to get their little ones started on the right track, they often ask for advice. The most common question is, "When is the best time to start training and/or breeding a Fell pony?" While various trainers and perhaps new breeders may disagree on the "right answer" to this, most veterinarians would probably give the same answer. That is, wait until a filly is at least 3 to breed. And wait until a pony is at least 3 or 4 to start any serious training – even then going slowly with them because they are still growing! The medical rationale behind this training doctrine is also probably why the British Driving Society will not allow ponies younger than 4 years of age to compete in their events, just as years ago by law ponies were not allowed to work in the mines until at least age 4. And if one asked longtime hill breeders the same question, the answer would likely be the same, not necessarily because of veterinary advice, but because that is the way it has been done "forever" and has worked! For centuries, weanlings or "suckers" would be kept in semi-feral herds until they were "stags" (unbroken 3 and 4-year-olds), when they would be brought to the Brough Hill Fair and other similar markets in droves. (Note: "Brough" is pronounced like "tough"). The Brough Hill Fair was established in 1330 AD as a major autumn market in northern England for livestock and other merchandise, and especially for



Lauren Earley (as 4 yo) & LaurelhIGHLAND Beatrix (10 days)

Fell ponies. The unbroken stags would be sold to tradesman, dealers, and other sorts to be trained for work under saddle, to pull light carts, for packwork, or trained to gears for use in the local mines. Although the Brough Hill Fair no longer serves this purpose, the tradition of raising Fell ponies in this manner continues, and there are still markets and fairs in which unbroken Fell ponies are sold. And while the numbers of semi-feral herds continues to dwindle, young Fell ponies raised on the fells today still may enjoy unbridled freedom (literally!) just as Nature intended, until age 3 or 4 when they are bred and/or started in training. If the training is started at age 3, it typically consists of only a short period of light training to start the pony under saddle or in harness. Not uncommonly, after this the pony is turned back out with the herd until the following year, to give it another year to mature.

Fell ponies, like most large or big-boned horses and ponies, are slow to fully mature, and are not completely "filled out"



Lunesdale Rock Rose (aka "Roxy") looks like quite the 'glamour girl' with all that hair, but looks are deceiving and she was still very much a baby at only 2 years old. At this stage she was too young for breeding or serious training, and lived out with our herd.

until age 7 or 8. Nonetheless, depending on the individual pony of course, they can be lightly started under saddle or in harness at age 3-4, and are usually easily trained because of their intelligence. This ease of training even applies to fell-raised ponies which may have had little or no handling at all before maturity, yet nonetheless with the right encouragement can become as easy to handle as their stable-raised counterparts. As with

any breed, young horses should not be overworked. This is especially important before the growth plates in their long bones have fused, since applying too much stress to these weight-bearing bones (via riding or doing too much cantering and/or lunge work on tight circles with 2-3 year-olds) can cause permanent damage. Congenital unsoundness in Fells is almost unheard of, but this does not mean that a Fell cannot be rendered unsound from overzealous training at a too-young age. Patience in waiting for Fells to mature generally pays off, because they tend to be long-lived in addition to hardy and sound. Thus, while many breeds might be retiring, a Fell may be just coming into its prime. Indeed, most Fell ponies probably live for more than 15 years, and many ponies compete successfully in the show ring well beyond that age. Many live for 20 years or more, and Fell ponies living and even being gently worked until their early 30's is not at all unheard of.

Skeletal maturation studies of various breeds have been reported. Although no one has done a detailed survey of the skeletal maturation specifically of the Fell pony, anecdotal evidence (x-rays of various parts at different ages in this breed) thus far



Fell ponies tend to learn quickly and approach new things with sensible caution. Here Janelle seems to be showing she has the same tendency!

Photo: Janelle Earley (as 2 yo) with LaurelhIGHLAND Sapphire

generally concurs with the literature, notwithstanding individual variation.¹ As a rough approximation, the horse's growth plates tend to fuse from the bottom up, meaning those closer to the ground fuse first. The actual times vary by breed and by individual. And although some breeds have been selectively bred to for faster development (eg., Thoroughbred, Quarter Horse), their development may appear more advanced on the outside than it actually is on the inside. So take these numbers from the literature with a grain of salt and **remember that all horses, regardless of breed, take 6-8 years to fully mature (including the Fell Pony.)** Individuals can also vary by a year or more, especially when you are talking about larger breeds and/or males, particularly geldings, which on average may take longer to grow. (Castration before puberty delays the closure of the growth plates.) Note that growth plate closure times vary somewhat in the published literature.^{2,3} Approximate closure times, as reported in the veterinary radiologic literature³, include:

Forelimb:

- Scapula (shoulder blade):** 1-2 years
- Humerus:** lower part 3-4 months; upper part 2-3 years
- Radius & ulna (forearm):** 2 - 3 years
- Coffin bone:** birth
- Small bones of knee:** 1.5 years
- Cannon bone:** 6 months
- Pastern:** birth—1 year
- Coffin bone:** birth

Hindlimb:

- Femur:** lower part 2 - 2 1/2 years; upper part 2-3 years
- Tibia:** lower part 1.5 - 2.5 years, upper part between 3 - 3.5 years
- Hock (including calcaneus):** 16 months—2 yrs. (Lower portions below hock similar to forelimb.)

Pelvis: 10-12 months

Vertebral column (spine):

- C1-C7 (neck): 4-5 years
- T1-L6 (back): 2-4 years

The relative lag in “closure” of growth plates in the neck and back is important to understand, particularly with an abundance of vertebrae and associated growth plates there. This does not mean they can't be ridden, but this has to be done in a safe way to avoid permanent injury. Starting a young horse in driving (as opposed to riding) is another option, which (assuming a light cart/driver) may be less stressful on young spines. For riding, a properly-fitting saddle that distributes the weight well is imperative for any horse, especially if less than 8 years old. It is equally important not to put too heavy a rider on a young horse because of the increased stress that would cause. The last growth plates to “close” are those in the animal's neck, so you also have to be very careful not to yank the neck around on a young horse.⁴ This is also important to remember even before training under saddle – for example, some people train a horse to tie by just tying them, and one should realize that if the horse pulls back hard it could permanently damage the growth plates there and/or fracture the neck, which happens not uncommonly.

In my husband's equine veterinary practice, the most common sites of growth plate injuries he sees include those in the neck, the distal radius (at the knee), and the fetlocks. “It is easi-

est to think of a 2-year-old horse as being equivalent to a human teenager – lanky, still growing, and prone to injury.” With this in mind, let us now consider the topic of “teenage pregnancy”! Just as it is important not to start serious work under saddle or in harness before age 3, breeding a filly before that age is equally risky to the long-term health of the pony. The combined weight of a pregnant uterus eventually exceeds 100 pounds, which is an awful lot of weight for a growing filly to carry for months on end, particularly with her immature spine taking the brunt of it. Most hill breeders, “would not breed a 2-year-old filly – or not on purpose anyway!” Some other breeders have said they would breed a 2-year-old filly simply to try to “stunt her growth” for fear she will go over height. There is no scientific basis for this belief, and in fact such a practice is unlikely to affect the ultimate height of the pony. More likely it will simply delay the onset of maturity by slowing the growth rate. Some breeders have also noted that fillies bred before maturity may actually end up with a permanent growth disturbance such as uneven growth (with unequal heights of withers and croup), but this anecdotal. There are, however, well-documented risks in breeding immature fillies. The first is that the added weight of the pregnancy can affect the growing bones, in particular the joints, just as riding an immature pony can pose similar risk, and may thus result in premature arthritis. Another well-known risk of breeding physically immature fillies is hip dystocia, in which the filly's pelvis is too small to deliver the foal, and the foal literally gets “stuck” in the birth canal at its hips. This, of course, can have disastrous consequences, including death of both the foal and its dam. Thus, most veterinarians and breeders recommend waiting until fillies are at least 3 years old to breed them, not only so that they can have a chance to grow and mature normally, but also to have a much greater chance of a successful delivery.

A young Fell pony may appear very deceiving to those less familiar with the breed -- that is, they are big-boned, sturdy ponies and may seem “big enough” at a young age to train or breed them. But do your pony a favor and err on the side of caution, realizing they may look big on the outside but are still babies on the inside! Each pony is an individual, which also

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should be taken into account, including an assessment of both physical and mental maturity. More often than not, if your pony isn't mentally ready for training, it will tell you! This does not mean one should not do any training with younger ponies. Of course, lessons on ground manners can begin with youngsters of any age. And, as long as the pony is mentally ready, it won't hurt most 2-year-olds to get them used to tack

and to begin teaching them with non-strenuous groundwork, as long as they are not asked to pull or carry heavy weight or do anything else that is strenuous. Most importantly, give your young pony some time to grow and further establish a bond with you. Patience will pay off because not only will the bond will be unbeatable, but your pony will be much happier and healthier in the long run!
MJG



Lunesdale Rock Rose & Lauren Earley

*When Roxy was imported at around 7 months alongside her almost 5 yo dam, they were rather "wild" as they came from a semi-feral herd. Nonetheless, with some handling, both became very easy to train. As a 3 yo, Roxy was lightly started under saddle, which she readily accepted. By the end of her 2-month training period she was even quiet enough to give our girls a ride lead-line, and smart enough not to dare put a foot out of place with such precious cargo! **Of course, not all 3 yo Fells are ready for this kind of job – some may take longer ... and some may never be this well-behaved!** But here is Roxy shown posing as a 3 yo with 3 yo Janelle, and also with 5 yo Lauren riding lead-line. After this she was turned back out with the herd to continue to mature. She will not be full-grown until age 7 or 8.*



Lunesdale Rock Rose & Janelle Earley

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Selected References:

¹ Unpublished data of author and Edward T. Earley, DVM

^{2,4} Bennett, PhD., Dr. Deb, "Ranger" (The Equine Studies Institute) <http://www.equinestudies.org/conformation.htm>, 2001 (Accessed 2002)

³Butler JA, Colles CM, Dyson SJ, Kold SE, Poulos PW. Clinical Radiology of the Horse, 2nd Edition Oxford: Blackwell Science Ltd: 2000