

# Pint-sized riders

Tiny riders perched on sizeable mounts might catch the spectators' gaze, but when they ride the right way it's often those very competitors who have the last laugh, says **Martha Terry**

**"YOU** look like a pea on a drum," is hardly the most complimentary of comments, but one that a petite rider must regularly endure, smile at and nod.

"If I got a pound every time someone told me my horses are massive..." muses Louise Harwood, 5ft 11in and a bit, and barely over seven stone. "Actually, if William Fox-Pitt rode them, they'd look fine. People tend to comment more when I'm jumping and I've got my pedals up, as my body is particularly short, so when my legs are folded up, I look really small."

Louise's biggest horse, Trevillick, is 17.1hh, and she has two four-star campaigners pushing 17hh. Meanwhile, fellow eventer Ros Canter, at 5ft 2in and under eight stone, finished fifth at Badminton on her European gold medalist, the 17hh-plus Allstar B, and has an equally tall three-star ride in Las Vegas 200. What is it about these giant horses that appeals to their pint-sized riders? And how can they train them to listen to the feather on their back?



Working with what you have: Sue Eggleton, who is 4ft 11in, in action with the 17.1hh Gukato

**L**OUISE insists she never seeks out large horses.

"The ideal height for me is 14.2hh," she laughs. "I compete a couple of ponies, which I was getting ready for my niece, but she's now too big for them, while I look perfect."

"I like 16hh to 16.2hh and thoroughbred, but I seem to have ended up with these big, chunky types at four-star — and it's hard for me to make the time. Turning them on cross-country can look messy as I don't have the strength as a rider. Andrew Nicholson has told me to sit right on the horse's back to make a tight turn; I can't do it in a nice forward position because of the sheer size of the horse compared to me."

"Of course, I won't turn away anything nice, but we're now strict about not buying anything over 16.2hh. And if it's from Ireland, not over 16hh as they always grow."

International dressage rider Nikki Barker (née Crisp) is another eight-stone lady who has "ended up with" giant horses, despite her preference for 16.2hhs. She rejects the

suggestion that size equals presence in the dressage arena.

"The only time you notice is in the warm-up when you can compare them," says Nikki, who rides the "lovely" 17.2hh stallion Durable at prix st georges. "Some smaller horses, like Damon Hill, have huge movement. I wouldn't pick a big horse out of choice, because it makes training slower and you have to be more patient. I think they're a year behind."

"Maybe it would be quicker with a taller

*"The only disadvantage is the embarrassment when I ride in someone else's saddle and have to twist the stirrup leathers, which seems to elicit a lot of giggles"*

SUE EGGLETON



Louise Harwood, 5ft 11in and a bit, riding Mr Potts during the showjumping phase at Burghley Horse Trials

rider — it's not that I'd want to ride with force, but I can't use resistance or strength with the aids — it just doesn't work."

Ros says she has no preference as to size. And sometimes horses' official height does not equate to how they ride.

"I go for horses that give me the right feel and have a great brain," she says. "Las Vegas is narrow with a small girth, so I don't look too small on him, while Allstar B has so much power and is bigger-bodied, so I find him bigger to ride. I can't be picky with size because I need to earn a living."

However, she does admit to "adoring" Zenshera, because he's only 15.2hh and so polite that I could turn him on sixpence."

"But it's part of the excitement of eventing that all horses are different and you have to adapt your training to suit each one," she adds.

Advanced event rider Sue Eggleton, who has two 17.1hhs despite being 4ft 11in, agrees.

"I'm a strong believer in working with what you have," says Sue, who bred one, Grafenacht and was "seduced" by the other, Gukato. "The advantage of my size is that I can ride anything — I do not look out of place on a 12.2hh and, as I am not concerned about height, I am happy with the tallest horses. The only thing I do not like is a wide horse — with short legs I need them to go down, I don't have any spare length

Pictures by Action Replay Photography and Peter Nixon



Ros Canter riding 17hh-plus Allstar B during the cross-country phase of the European Championships at Strzegom, Poland

## 4 TOP TIPS FOR SUCCESS FOR SMALL RIDERS

● **Scarlett Ward:** "My legs barely come below the saddle flaps, and I've nearly been jumped off a number of times, so I use sticky spray — Sporty Haft-Spray — on my boots to stop myself getting catapulted. Also, I do sitting trot, and lots of lengthening and shortening exercises over poles on the ground to engage the hind end."

● **Sue Eggleton:** "I have had both my dressage and showjumping saddles custom-made by WOW, so that they fit my big horses, but the flaps are short and don't interfere. I also have extra long reins for dressage, so that the horse can stretch fully in the free walk, as my arms are short."

● **Elizabeth Allen:** "I work hard to maintain a strong core to keep my position in the saddle — lots of planking, exercises on a wobble pad, and riding seven horses a day, plus yard work and running next to kids cantering and jumping ponies."

● **Ros Canter:** "I do lots of transitions with all my horses — in the arena and out on the hills — as the more I can teach them to listen to my body, the easier it is to ride faster and trust the bigger horses."

Scarlett Ward and 17.2hh Calista H. Scarlett has seven horses in her yard over 16.3hh

to go out sideways first.

The only disadvantage is the embarrassment when I ride in someone else's saddle and have to twist the stirrup leathers, which seems to elicit a lot of giggles. Or people literally stop, smile and comment on the size disparity; I'll say, 'You're laughing at me!', which is a good ice-breaker and gets a chuckle."

While most small riders end up with, rather than choose, big horses, 5ft 2in showjumper Scarlett Ward has seven horses in her yard over 16.3hh and says she "feels comfortable up there". Her top horse, Calista H, is 17.2hh, and has won and been placed in puissance and six-bar classes up to 1.75m plus jumped internationally in 1.50m grands prix.

"She's incredibly tall and long, and you feel a long way from the floor, but no jump feels too big when you're on her," Scarlett says. "I get on with big horses and have learnt to ride them."

And Nikki admits that although she can't see many pros of a big horse — "there's more to brush, clip, and I had to upgrade my lorry" — she'd prefer a "naughty big one than a little one."

"You've got more around you," she says. "They can't just drop a shoulder — you're sitting on the Titanic."

**G**IVEN that they're not the obvious match, these unlikely pairings succeed hinges on training and technique. Ros plays to each horse's strengths.

Allstar B is a fantastic jumper, but he wouldn't find tight grids easy as he is big-bodied, so I only use them occasionally as it's important he enjoys his work," she says. "I am disciplined with the bigger horses, so that their manners are good on the ground and when ridden. More recently, I have ridden him with longer reins when jumping and that has had a huge impact on my seat and how secure I am, which has had a knock-on effect in my confidence and ability to be more competitive cross-country."

Elizabeth Allen, who is 5ft 3in and seven-and-a-half stone, competes two 18.1hh-plus dressage horses. She works alongside "a very tall" international grand prix rider in Jonny Clarke-West, so is used to riding his big horses. "My grand prix horse, Khartoum, has

always been time to re-esside as the b now, but I h work on the to follow my, then the

Fellow d they must b to react."

"I like the hot, as they De La Bryer with, but no quite useful."

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Elizabeth Allen