

FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY PONY FINALS

By Stacey Meier and Joanie Morris



The 2007 United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) Pony Finals National Championships is an event that is marked on the calendars of thousands of pony riders across the country. To ride at the prestigious event, which celebrated its 40th anniversary August 15-19, is a major achievement. To simply qualify for the event is a milestone in the showing lives of hundreds of determined and horse-crazed kids across the country. The 2007 Pony Finals didn't disappoint, where five USEF national championships were awarded and history was made.

It's hard to deter the spirit of USEF pony riders. They came from every corner of the country to compete, renew friendships from past finals and test their skills against the other best pony riders in the nation. But a 10-year-old girl from New York City would find herself rewriting the record books and carving a place for three ponies in history.

Never before at Pony Finals had one rider had the talent, collection of fine ponies and the stamina to contest all three divisions—small, medium and large—and stand as the champion across the board. But, Lillie Keenan's accomplishments on Sunday changed all that. At the end of the five-day event, Keenan's name would be synonymous with the word "champion" at the Kentucky Horse Park.

Big Numbers and Big Fun

This year's event was held under some of the toughest weather conditions ever. The first few days saw searing temperatures over 100 degrees and a thick blanket of humidity. But, not even the roasting sky could keep some 420 entries from taking over the Kentucky Horse Park with more than 530 ponies. In total, more than 700 entries were on the books, which meant for huge fields full of some of the country's most talented riders and ponies.

Five national championships were up for grabs this year: the Wild Horsefeathers/USEF National Hunter Pony Championship; the Wild Horsefeathers/USEF National Green Hunter Pony Championship; the USEF Pony Medal; and the pair of competitions (individual and team) known as the Adequan®/USEF National Pony Jumper Championship.

The hunter pony championships are three-phase competitions in which the pony's conformation, way of moving under saddle and jumping ability are judged. The Pony Medal Final tests young riders in a head-to-head competition, judging both their equitation and their ability to compete over a technical and demanding course. With the pony jumper championships, ponies and riders qualify by their placement as one of the top four pony/rider combinations in their zone standings and compete in two team rounds, with the top 60%.

Overall Hunter Pony Champion— Lillie Keenan and Enchanted Forest

By far, the biggest story to come out of these Pony Finals was the amazing triple win performed by Keenan.

The first win came in the small hunter pony division aboard the 13-year-old mare named Blackberry owned by Heritage Farm of Katonah, NY. Keenan was trailing in this division, but she came from behind to post top scores in the over fences class to finish on a winning score of 1,009 points.

Then, in a bid to take a second title, Keenan continued the lead she established earlier in the medium pony hunter division to finish on a score of 1,058 points aboard Enchanted Forest. The 12-year-old New Forest gelding is owned by New York's Chansonette Farm, LLC.

Opposite: Lillie Keenan and Enchanted Forest captured the Wild Horsefeathers/USEF National Hunter Pony Championship and the medium hunter pony division. Keenan won all of the hunter pony divisions, becoming the first rider to ever do so in the event's history.

Below: Lillie Keenan with Enchanted Forest



Photo: Photos.com (2)

“Thank You”

An event as big as the USEF Pony Finals takes a lot of helping hands. The USEF and Marion Maybank (USEF Director of Hunter Disciplines and event organizer) and Jennifer Haydon (USEF Director of National Show Jumping Programs) would like to extend their gratitude to the following individuals:

Betsy Fishback, Elaine Schott, Beth Miner, Elizabeth Lampert, Jenny Gordon, Cindy Bozen, Caitlin Mallory, Paige Rassas and Elvenstar Farm.

Thanks to Our Sponsors...

The 2007 USEF Pony Finals would like to thank the following for their generous sponsorship and support of the program.

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To prove her dominance in the competition, Keenan returned to the ring for a third time to take the title in the large hunter pony division. This time, she was aboard the 10-year-old Dutch bay gelding Vanity Fair. She posted a final score of 1045.5 points. Vanity Fair is owned by Adrienne Sternlicht of Greenwich, CT.

It was a long week of showing for Keenan, who came to Pony Finals for a third time, and she admitted that it was quite a challenge. For her, she thrived on the excitement of competition, but relished in the fact that when it was over she had earned the recognition she felt her ponies deserved. It's not every day that you stand first among a field of 257 competitors in the Federation's largest, and perhaps, most prestigious competitive championship series.

Nerves crept in before her jumping round on her medium pony, Enchanted Forest. The pony has a long and storied career in the show ring. This championship is the only one to have eluded him. His performance in the ring told the story, and he was flawless on the way to the medium (and overall) title.

“Enchanted Forest is the most amazing medium that there ever was,” said Keenan's coach, Patricia Griffith. “This was the only championship that he hadn't won. I was happy for that pony because his name should be on that trophy. He is an incredible, incredible pony.”

Keenan, who is poised well beyond her 10 years, rode a beautiful round.

“In the mediums she was most nervous because she had done it once, and it's really hard to do it again,” said Griffith. “But in the large division, she was so relaxed because she thought there was no way this could happen. So, she just went out there and had fun.”

The trainer admitted that she thought it was a possibility for her student to win all three titles, but she really never thought it would happen.

“It was awesome,” said Griffith. “It's pretty incredible to hold it together in the hot seat that many times in a row in one day.”

Keenan jumped another impeccable round on Vanity Fair, who had won the 2005 National Green Hunter Pony Championship with his owner, Sternlicht. The pony was a consummate professional in the ring despite being the newest ride in Keenan's string.

“I definitely didn't know I could win all three,” said Keenan. “Yesterday, I had a lot of help in the mediums and the larges, but no way did I think I could get three for three. The best part was all the excitement and how the pressure just falls off. When it's over and it just worked out for me. I was really, really happy.”

Keenan's ponies are all very different, not only in size, but in their personalities. She appreciates them for who they are as much as the success they have afforded her.

“I don't have a favorite,” she said. “They all have big strides, but every animal has its own personality. Hopefully I will get to ride them as long as possible.”

Keenan's mother, Pam, was also a very successful rider. Lillie's interest in riding was sparked by pictures around the house of her mom competing. Uninspired at six by any other activities, the youngster asked if she could take riding lessons.

“One day I just asked her if I could ride,” said Keenan. “I loved it so. My mom never really found anything before that I really loved, but the first day that I got on a pony that was it.”

Keenan would live at the barn if allowed, but school is also a priority. She attends Spence School in New York City.

“At the most, I ride eight or nine ponies a day,” she said. “I try to go to the barn five or six days a week, as much as I can. I go right after school and first thing in the morning on the weekends.” She said that riding is definitely her biggest passion and her first love. “I do a little gymnastics and a little ballet...mostly I just ride. I go to the barn a lot, and I just love animals so much.”

Griffiths loves having the young pony fanatic around the barn and appreciates her relationship with her ponies. Keenan is fortunate enough to have four ponies of her own, plus others that she leases and rides.

“She knows her ponies,” said Griffith. “She knows what bridles they go in, what they eat. She spends time with them. It couldn't happen to a better kid. She'll ride eight ponies, and she's still there after, cleaning tack, cleaning stalls...she's incredible. She's a super student. She's one of the best students I've ever had, and she hangs on every word.”

Blackberry, Enchanted Forest and Vanity Fair will get a break after their winning efforts at Pony Finals, but Keenan headed to the Monmouth Horse Show to get a pair of ponies she acquired late in the season qualified for the indoor shows.

Despite her busy schedule and regular successes, Keenan hasn't lost sight of the fact that sometimes it takes a village to build a champion.



PhotoPhotos.com (10)

Top row, left to right: Lillie Keenan capturing the large hunter pony division with Vanity Fair; Lillie Keenan capturing the small hunter pony division with Blackberry. Victoria Colvin and Ballou captured the small green hunter pony division. Middle row, left to right: Kaitlyn Campbell captured the large green hunter pony division aboard Valentine. USEF Pony Medal winners Taylor Ann Adams and Millpond Celebrity. Elizabeth Boone, winner of the Adequan®/USEF National Pony Jumper Individual Championship. Bottom row, left to right: Emerson Burr Horsemanship Test winners: Annie Bolling (8 and Under). Carly Reinsel (Ages 9-11). Madyson Ward (Ages 12-14). Arden Cone (Ages 15 and Up).

"I have a lot of support from my family and my friends and my trainer," she said. "Everyone at the barn is supportive...even if maybe they didn't do so great. They'll root for you, and even if they do great, they'll want you to do well, too."

Keenan sat on Enchanted Forest waiting to go back into the ring and receive her final award on the final day of the championship. It was from the back of her champion pony that she summed it all up. "I just really, really love them all," she said simply of her three champion ponies.

Pony Jumper Team Champions—Zone Four

It was long past sundown on the Friday of Pony Finals but the excitement was still ricocheting off the winners of the Adequan/USEF National Pony Jumper Team Championship harder than a racquetball at maximum velocity. Ten teams had lined up for the challenge, and when the dust settled, the team from Zone 4 (Claudia Billups and Salsa; Edie Ringger and Double Delight; Brittini Raflowitz and Tallyman; and Leigh Anne Hartrampf and Spudd Webb) put together an amazing performance and finished with only four faults over the two rounds.



It was their third trip as a team to the championships and the girls from the Southeastern U.S. made marked improvement every year. They placed eighth in 2005 and fourth in 2006. Following this mathematical progression, they were set for a win in 2007.

"It felt like a dream to win," said 12-year-old Raflowitz. "I've wanted this for so long. We were fourth last year. It's gone up four ribbons every single year."

Raflowitz, from Palm City, FL, bravely guided Tallyman, an 11-year-old Westphalian gelding, through the courses and was thrilled with her pony's performance.

Ringger, from Upatoi, GA, was pleased that her pony was so attentive in the busy arena. She was worried that he might not keep his head in the game, but the 13-year-old Welsh/Thoroughbred cross belied the 16-year-old's expectations and jumped around confidently.

"It's unbelievable, it's the best day of my life," said Ringger. "I'm so excited. My pony is really amazing, but he can be spooky. I'm really glad that we jumped clear and that he listened to me. He was the best he's ever felt before, and my

trainer said I rode the best I ever rode."

The enthusiasm from this quartet was infectious, and there was more laughter and hugging than there were words. Guided by Aaron Vale and Brett Raflowitz (Brittini's father), the team turned in one good performance after another. Billups, 12, wasn't as confident coming into the championships as some of her teammates because she and Salsa had been having some communication problems prior to the competition.

"I've been here three years, and we finally did it," said Billups. "Salsa was hot; she's always hot. 'Hot Salsa' we call her. I thought she'd be hotter in the second round, but she was actually quieter. I'm proud of Salsa because the week before Pony Finals we were stopping at every jump."

Hartrampf has been riding the eight-year-old German Sport Pony Spudd Webb for over two years, and he put in a faultless performance over the course of this championship. Hartrampf, 16, from Atlanta, GA, was proud of how hard he tried.

"It's unreal," she said. "I just kept myself thinking that we had a good chance. My

pony is good; he has a lot of heart.”

That’s a fair description of all eight members of the Gold medal team.

The Silver medal went to Zone 8 & 9 (combined) with riders Rebecca Chesne of Park City, UT, aboard Gidget; Courtney Youell of Snohomish, WA, aboard Chance to Shine; Bryn Sadler of Lynnville, TN, aboard Darcy; and Elizabeth Brackett of Bainbridge Island, WA, aboard Boadicea. Zone 10 captured the Bronze medal with a total of 12 faults. The team included: Tommi Clark, 16, aboard Follow My Lead; Alexandra Willoughby, 14, aboard Fool’s Gold; Isabella Pitts, 13, aboard Roulette; and Madeline Burkhartsmeier, 14, aboard Hocus Pocus.

USEF Pony Medal Final Champion—Taylor Ann Adams and Millpond Celebrity

Taylor Ann Adams’ day started early on the Friday of Pony Finals. But the 10 hours spent at the show grounds paid off and the 14-year-old won the Pony Medal Final in an exciting face-off with her good friend, Elizabeth Boone.

Riding Millpond Celebrity, Adams bested 201 other competitors. But, it eventually came down to her and Boone returning to the ring to determine the champion. The Pony Medal Final is an equitation class which tests a variety of skills, including the rider’s ability to ride and remember the course correctly.

This year’s course included trotting a fence, counter cantering a fence and halting in a line.

It was through the generosity of Olivia Haslam that Adams was able to use the nine-year-old Welsh/Thoroughbred cross pony. Haslam had recently purchased the pony from Sarah Garnett, who was responsible for the pony’s training.

“I rode him all this year,” said Adams of Eads, TN. “Now Olivia has him, she bought him from Sarah. They sent him up here because we asked to borrow him for the Medal. They were very nice people and sent him.”

The strawberry roan pony was obedient and stylish throughout the entire process and Adams knew he was capable of carrying her to a really good performance. Adams was thankful to have such a rock-solid mount for this championship.

“I had confidence in him,” said Adams. “I didn’t really have much confidence in myself. He’s easy, quiet. I love him. He has the best personality, and he’s pretty experienced.”

Adams and Boone had only a few minutes to learn yet another course, and Boone (riding her own 11-year-old Bridgewater) went first. Unfortunately, she jumped the wrong last fence. Instead of giving Adams some breathing room, it made her stress that maybe she had learned the wrong course.

“I was dying!” said Adams. “Elizabeth and I were sitting out there practically crying together before we went. She’s a really good friend. She jumped the wrong last jump, and I was thinking that maybe she was right and I was wrong. I first walked in there, and I didn’t know. I thought about it and thought about it, and I got it right.”

Adams loves coming to Pony Finals and also appreciates the opportunity that her life, much of which is spent on the road, affords her.

“I like seeing everybody,” she said. “Because we live in different cities, I get to see all my close friends here. I’ve been home schooling for the past three or four years. I love this, and this is where my friends are. I like the traveling. I like to meet new and different people. It’s really exciting. You get to be really close with people, much closer than you do on a normal life basis.”



Photo: Photos.com [2]

Above: Millpond Celebrity and Taylor Ann Adams became celebrities after they captured the USEF Pony Medal Final.

Opposite: Zone 4 included Claudia Billups, 12, on Salsa; Edie Ringger, 16, on Double Delight; Brittni Raflowitz, 12, on Tallyman; and Leigh Hartrampf, 16, on Spudd Webb.



Above: Elizabeth Boone and Magic BB triumphed as the Adequan®/USEF National Pony Jumper Champion-Individual.

Below: Victoria Colvin and Cortina captured the Wild Horsefeathers/USEF National Green Hunter Pony Championship.



Pony Jumper Individual Championship—Elizabeth Boone and Magic BB

Boone, despite finishing as the reserve champion in the Medal Final, made up for her mistake the following day, zooming to the Adequan®/USEF National Pony Jumper Individual Championship with Magic BB.

Owned by Campbellcroft, LLC, Magic BB is easy to like. Between his honest face and floppy ears, the charisma just falls off of him. At 19 years old, his thoughtful approach to life and jumping is not lost on his very grateful 13-year-old rider.

“He’s pretty old, but he’s really good,” said Boone of Lexington, KY. “He’ll leave from any distance. He loves to go out and eat all day. We’ve leased

him for about a year. He’s been to Pony Finals quite a few times.” Eight ponies jumped two clean rounds in the team portion of the competition, but Magic BB was the only pony to jump four clean rounds. Four ponies jumped off for the Bronze medal, carrying four faults apiece. Spudd Webb and Hartrampf (part of Zone 4’s winning team) jumped clean, and she took home two medals from the championship.

For Boone, it came down to two ponies again. Magic BB and Partly Cloudy (ridden by Tori Berlin) were both on a score of zero, resulting in the jump-off for the Gold medal. This time, the rider had the luxury of going second.

Berlin and Kimberly Brunson’s Arabian pony, Partly Cloudy, went into the arena and had the second-to-last fence down—their only mistake of the whole championship. That meant that all Boone had to do was jump clear.

Riding Magic BB, she could consider it done.

“It took a little of the pressure off,” she said. “I was just going to take my time and ride a nice smooth round.”

According to his rider, Magic BB will be heading to his field and a well-earned bag of spicy Doritos after the championships. Boone thinks a break for the classy veteran is well-deserved. A student of Debbi White, Boone will bring him back into work for the indoor shows this fall and then head back to Florida for the winter.

Overall Green Hunter Pony Champion—Victoria Colvin and Cortina

Victoria Colvin was one busy nine-year-old. With six ponies in the competition, it was aboard Scott Stewart’s Cortina that she posted a score of 1,059 to win the overall title, as well as winning the small green pony hunter championship with her own pony, Ballou.

Extremely professional at such a young age, the Loxahatchee, FL, resi-

dent was confident in nine-year-old Cortina’s ability before she ever rode her into the ring.

“I’ve been riding her for about a year,” said Colvin of the Warmblood-cross pony. “She’s more made than Ballou. She’s pretty easy because you can loop the reins and she’s an easy swap. She was pretty made when I first started riding her.”

Speaking to Colvin is like talking to a thoughtful professional four times her age.

She has a mind for horses more than people, and despite all the fanfare surrounding Pony Finals (where she finished at sixth in 2006) her focus is firmly on her job.

“The best part about this show is riding the ponies,” she said. “It is like a lot of the other shows except for the drive. I think it took about 16 hours.”

Colvin rode Ballou in some of the worst of this year’s weather during the five-day series. She entered the ring to start her jumping round and many of the jump decorations began to blow over in a wind storm that was reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz*. The announcer stopped Colvin before she jumped the first fence and asked her to leave the ring while the weather settled and the jump crew could reset the fences. Colvin didn’t let the conditions faze her, and she returned a few minutes later to jump a beautiful round. The strength of her two-year partnership with her eight-year-old Welsh Pony paid off.

“My pony [Ballou] is greener,” said Colvin. “I wasn’t going to get over the first jump when I first went in because the leaves were blowing everywhere and the plants were falling over. They made me come out, and I gave him a canter and then he was good because there was no bad weather.”

Just good riding.

Kaitlin Campbell, 15, and her mount, Valentine, rode away with the Large Green Pony Hunter Championship title with a total score of 1,021. Campbell, of Upper Black Eddy, PA, and Valentine, a six-year-old bay gelding owned by Boggs Hill, kept their lead through the competition to win handily over her competition.

And Even More Awards...

Two awards were given prior to the pony jumper individual championship—the Buttons ‘N’ Bows Sportsmanship Trophy and the Short Stop Perpetual Trophy.

Paul Gallo, 17, of Milwaukee, WI, won the Buttons ‘N’ Bows Trophy for his exceptional sportsmanship throughout the show. This annual award is based on the junior rider who best personifies the high standards and virtues of integrity, sportsmanship, honor, courage, good temper and unselfishness.

Gabriela Mershad, 12, won the Short Stop Perpetual Trophy. This award is given based on the judges’ opinions as to which rider exhibited the best riding style throughout the jumper portion of the competition. Mershad is a jumper rider from New Albany, OH.

The Emerson Burr Horsemanship Awards were presented to four winners among four age divisions. This year, the recipients were: Annie Bolling of Fairhope, AL (8 and Under); Carly Reinsel of Alpharetta, GA (Ages 9-11); Madyson Ward of Zionsville, IN, (Ages 12-14); and Arden Cone of Landrum, SC (15 and Up).

The awards program was created in 2002 by friends and family of the late Emerson Burr to promote and perpetuate good horsemanship in younger equestrians. In the past, the awards competition had been held solely at the USEF Pony Finals National Championships until 2006, when the program was expanded to include the Fairfield County Hunt Club June Benefit Horse Show in Westport, CT. The program consisted of two tests—a written test and a hands-on horsemanship test. The young equestrians in each of the four age groups who scored the highest on the written test moved on to the hands-on horsemanship test. The highest scoring child in each age group received a \$500 monetary grant for furthering their education or offsetting equestrian-related costs.

Lessons Learned

Every child that attends the USEF Pony Finals National Championships learns something important. At the end of the day, or the end of the show, what really matters is the experience. For many riders, this was the first trip to the “big pony show.” For others, it was a return appearance and a chance to once again saddle up and show the world what they have learned since last year.

In the end, it’s about the experience. The USEF hopes that each and every pony hunter and jumper that made the trip to the Kentucky Horse Park to participate in the 2007 USEF Pony Finals took home memories for a lifetime. ■

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