

From an article which appeared in *Horse & Hound* Dec. 1992.

ADELLA LITHMAN recalls the career of a show pony variously described as 'floating', 'exquisite' and even 'ethereal'.

MUCH CUNNING artistry went into the production of the record breaking, history-making Holly Of Spring the Wembley pony champion four times in succession.

Not least was the fact that the pint-sized rider's hair was permed to make her beribboned bunches look full and thick, and that she had to develop a jolly singing voice to encourage the pony to prick its ears.



Holly Of Spring: a show artiste produced to perfection

There was purposefully little schooling either, mostly lunging, hacks in the countryside, cubbing and teaching her a few curious tricks.

Davina Whiteman, Holly's producer and one of today's lady show riders says: "I knew the pony's family and, if they were schooled, they lost their presence.

The family was in fact a great dynasty founded by breeder Albert Deptford and Holly Of Spring sprang from the Pretty Polly line—by Gems Signet out of Penhill Finola.

Pretty Polly won the supreme pony accolade twice in '50 and '51, and her jockey was a chubby cheeked 10-year-old, Miss Lee Smith, now Davina Whiteman BHSI.

"Holly," she says, "was typical of the Pretty, Polly family. The minute they walked into a ring they grew two inches, had show charisma and champions' brains."

But, according to Davina, Holly, a 13.2hh chestnut mare, could not canter. "Well not cantering as I know it," she declares. "She had a long, lopy stride and we had to keep her to the big rings."

When Holly turned three, Mr Deptford planned to send her to Davina to be broken and some prospective clients of hers, the Cooper family who had already read much praise about Holly in *Horse and Hound*, were anxious to see her.

Claude Cooper, who has since died, ran a company of amusement arcades, cinemas, and casinos. His wife, Elsie, and their daughters Claudia, now 30, Cathryn, 27, and 21-year-old Carol were enthusiastic but new to the show pony world.

"We were at a riding school and I remember," Cathryn says wincing "the ponies were plaited with rubber bands and I was showing in a maroon jacket and hat. . ."

Eventually Coopers moved their ponies including Trehearne Vagabond — who, with Cathryn in the saddle was one of the few ever to beat Holly — to Davina's yard.

Holly meanwhile was broken and shown lightly under saddle by two long-legged youngsters, Bridget Ensten, who later went on to become the junior three-day eventing team silver medallist.

Then, in 1975, when Cathryn had just turned 10, Claude Cooper

bought Holly for her at a cost of £8,000. "I thought the pony was massive and so powerful, with such a big stride. It was difficult for me to sit to her," recalled Cathryn.

Davina and the Coopers worked hard at turning pony and rider into a combination, and then Davina employed more cunning in getting them to their first show without a nervous panic. She simply pretended until the last minute that Cathryn was riding Vagabond.

They went on to win their first Wembley that year, with the little jockey given full stage direction. "I did not know what I was doing," said Cathryn "Davina told me to follow the show given by the girl on the fourteen two and whatever she did, I was to keep behind and follow. She also had to explain how to do the lap of honour there "

The pair swept the 13.2hh championship board during the following three years, although it was not always plain sailing. Cathryn got bucked off once, and beaten into second place at least twice a season.

The pony, though, was a committed show artiste and if the lorry left the yard without her she could box walk for the rest of the day.

She could go badly at home but, apart from the one misdemeanour, always went beautifully in the ring. Critics and reporters during '75, '76, '77 and '78 waxed lyrical with

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fulsome adjectives, describing Holly as “floating”, “exquisite” and even “ethereal”.

Despite all that, people could walk past her in the stables at home and she would not even merit a second glance.

Davina’s talent was trumpeted too. “To produce a pony going with the exuberance and finesse of Holly’s,” wrote one equestrian reporter, “and yet still controllable by one as small as Cathryn, is an art long associated with the Lee Smith family, and amply demonstrated by Davina.”

Fact File

Born: 1971
Retired: 1978
Breeding: by **Gems Signet out of Penhill Finola**
Height: 13.2hh
Successes: **Four times pony champion at Wembley**

In 1989 she was decorated with a garland and “bridal” brow band and taken with her foal, Holly’s Wild Mink, to make a surprise guest appearance at Cathryn’s wedding party.

The debate as to whether Holly or Pretty Polly was the best show pony goes on today: they both floated, were real stars, and had amazing temperaments. Polly had the correct conformation, while Holly’s success was considered by some to be the result of superb production. As Davina says, Holly was a “going” machine.

Holly Of Spring’s daughter, Holly’s Gem, at the start of her career at the Shropshire and West Midlands centenary show at Shrewsbury in the early 90s. Owned by Mrs A Penalurick.



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