

Don't Supersize Me
or
Why I Ride A Small Horse
By Lynn Acton

I've been told that Bronzz is too small for me; if I were "serious", I'd have a "real horse." Translation: if I were serious about competing and impressing other people. I'm not. My zany bright chestnut Arab is the equine love of my life, and I'm serious about having fun with him, while we both learn as much as we can. Since I'm the one who has to live with my horse, ride him, and trust him, I chose him according to what's important to *me*, and his size was one of those factors. But lest you think I'm squashing some hapless little pony, here are our stats.

I'm 5'3, 120 pounds. Bronzz is 14.3 and tapes at 850 pounds. Based on the standard rule that a healthy horse can carry one-fourth of his own weight, I am well within Bronzz's weight limit, even with our western saddle. Since he has a big barrel, my feet barely hang to his belly line even when I ride bareback.

There was a time when I preferred big horses, the bigger the better. One of my all time favorites was a 17.2 eventer named Tiny. I still enjoy riding a big horse occasionally, and my sister's Oldenburg/Appaloosa is a special treat. As my main mount, though, I have found that I feel most comfortable on a small, compact horse. This is, I hasten to add, entirely my own personal preference based on my size, my riding goals, my sense of security, and the intangible sense of what kind of horse feels "just right" underneath me.

Small horses fit through more places on trails, and are handy and maneuverable in ways that larger horses can't be. My husband refers to Bronzz as my Ferrari Horse because he can do zero to 25 mph in two strides, stop just as fast, and turn on the proverbial dime. He's well balanced and light on his feet, which has saved us from grief when we encountered surprises on trails. He also catches on quickly to dressage moves that larger horses have to practice for months.

Because I'm small, I can move better *with* a smaller horse. Although my sitting trot is respectable, I don't have the range of motion to follow a big horse's stride as smoothly. The same principle applies if the horse bucks. I used to ride a friend's 16.3 Standardbred. I learned from painful experience that I had exactly two bucks to get Sassy under control before I was launched. When Bronzz bucks, I can laugh and tell him to stop being ridiculous.

I can safely allow a smaller horse extra bounce when he's frisky, and the freedom to ad lib occasionally, such as the time Bronzz got bored trotting straight ahead in our lesson, so he cantered diagonally across the arena. I couldn't scold him; I was laughing too hard. While some people disapprove of such "leniency", Bronzz and I have come to understand each other better through these dialogues, and I believe we are better partners because of it. The flair we admire in horses who are especially fun to watch requires enthusiasm and some latitude for self-expression. There is a reason that horses trained for unthinking obedience are called "*dead broke*."

For people who aren't pint-sized like me, size is still relative. I was told that my 6 foot tall husband absolutely needed a draft cross to carry him. Malarky. At his heftiest, Jerry and his saddle together added up to 250 pounds. An old time cavalry mount was expected to carry 250 pounds of rider and gear, and that wasn't just for a bird-watching stroll through the woods. Sapphire is cavalry horse size: 15.1, a little over 1,000 pounds. Her 32 year old back, according to her chiropractor, is still in great shape. Her retirement was forced by bad knees, more likely a result of too many years of low hoof angles.

If your goal is a long, healthy working life for your horse, there are a variety of factors that can be more significant than the weight the horse carries.

- Smaller horses tend to be sturdier. The larger a horse is, the more correct his conformation must be to maintain soundness.
- The rider should be well balanced. A heavy rider who is well-balanced is easier to carry than a lighter one who is off-balance. Just imagine carrying a wobbly child piggyback.
- The saddle must fit the horse comfortably. Studies indicate that upwards of 50% of regularly ridden horses have back pain, most often from poorly fitting saddles. Pain can not only cause behavior problems, but compensations that lead to premature arthritis and lameness.
- Ride judiciously, making sure your horse is trained, conditioned, and properly warmed up for whatever activity you ask of him.
- Give your horse a healthy lifestyle, with maximum turnout, quality hay, and no more concentrates than necessary to maintain a trim weight.
- Get first rate farrier care. This cannot be emphasized enough. Any imbalance in hooves is a recipe for lameness. Imagine wearing a shim inside your shoe so that your foot didn't land level. Or a shoe that's too long for your foot (the equivalent of long toes). Long toes and

incorrect angles stress leg joints, and create postural problems that are reflected in back pain.

- If you have a youngster, don't ride him until he's at least 3 years old. One of my mentors likes to say that for the extra year you wait at the beginning of the horse's life, you get another 10 years at the other end. Her healthy, feisty older horses testify to this philosophy.

We all have personal preferences. That's why horses come in so many sizes and types. My preference for smaller horses is just that, a personal preference, not a value judgment. But on the subject of value judgments, there is a sad tendency in the horse world to equate bigger with better, and to judge people by the type of horse they ride. Bigger is not better; it's just different. And a "good horse" is the one who is right for a given person, regardless of size, breed, or type. The horse people I admire are those who are considerate and respectful of their horses. It doesn't matter what kind of horse they ride, how well they ride, or if they never ride at all.