



Vanessa Everton with daughter Ashley riding ARANUI CHABLIS.



Maxine Reed Smythe with daughter Jordan riding MANGAKARAA CRYSTAL.



LANGTREE ULYSSES ridden by Georgia Nikora.

“I think it’s so important that children are allowed the opportunity to learn and are actually regularly riding the ponies that they will compete on in the ring.”

SHOWING TO WIN IN LEAD REIN AND FIRST RIDDEN CLASSES

THREE PROMINENT PRODUCERS DISCUSS HOW TO SUCCEED IN THE LEAD REIN AND FIRST RIDDEN RINGS.

WORDS: JENNIFER BOYES PHOTOS: MENDIP FARM PHOTOGRAPHY

There is nothing more pleasing than watching a top notch lead-rein or first ridden pony carefully carrying its young jockey around a show ring. A rare and highly valued find, the perfect pony combines correct conformation with good movement and an exemplary temperament, making it a comfortable and manageable ride for its small rider. Show classes are highly competitive throughout New Zealand with standards of training, presentation and turnout becoming ever more professional.

The format of both classes is kept relatively simple. Lead Rein judges usually ask for a simple trot on the circle, similar to an in-hand showing class. A basic individual show then follows which normally includes a trot on each rein. Occasionally a halt is also asked for in the middle of the workout. First Ridden classes are slightly more demanding as the jockey must show his or her pony without the help of a handler. As a group, only walk and trot are permitted. However, canter may be asked for in the individual phase.

Cambridge based **Maxine Reed-Smythe** knows a thing or two about what it takes to produce a winning pony. Earlier this year, she led the delightful *Mangakaraa Crystal* to clinch the Leading Rein Pony of the Year title at the 2009 Kelt Capital Horse of the Year Show, with five-year-old daughter, Jordan Smythe, aboard.

“*Crystal* is an absolute gem,” smiles Maxine. “We bought her when Jordan was 18 months old and starting to show a real interest in the ponies. She was a scruffy, hairy unbroken three year old but when she came trotting around the corner her fantastic shoulder and gorgeous trot leapt out at me.

She is the perfect lead rein pony as she is completely safe and beautifully mannered. However, she still has that must-have pizzazz about her which probably comes from her riding pony breeding. She’s a Welsh part-bred but with show pony movement and presence.”

Maxine has invested a huge amount of time and effort into

transforming a young, green *Crystal* into the multi-champion pony that she is today. According to Maxine, just as much effort is needed to produce an excellent lead rein pony as any of the larger show ponies or horses.

“In the early days, I spent a lot of time lunging *Crystal* and teaching her to lead correctly. The hard work paid off as she’s now a push button lead rein pony and will halt, walk and trot on the most subtle of commands,” explains Maxine. “It’s also important to point out that Jordan has been involved in *Crystal*’s training since very early on. When she was four, she rode her every day. She would spend twenty minutes on the lunge and then go for a hack. Now she’s five, she schools *Crystal* entirely by herself.

I think it’s so important that children are allowed the opportunity to learn and are actually regularly riding the ponies that they will compete on in the ring. I have seen so many lead rein combinations that are turned out beautifully but the children look like they have never sat on the pony in their life!”

Maxine, who comes from a showing family and has also worked in professional show yards in the UK, is well known for her meticulous approach to presentation.

“It’s all about the overall picture,” says Maxine. “Everything must fit and be relevant, from the saddle to the stirrups. Pay attention to the smallest of details, such as making sure that the colour of the child’s jodhpurs complements the colour of the pony.

The turnout of the handler is obviously highly important in the lead rein class as well. The most important thing to remember is that the handler should blend in. Don’t wear a hat that is so big that it gets in the way and wear shoes you can actually run in. I usually wear a navy blue skirt with a false pleat in it so I can move easily and have a variety of smart jackets to match.”

Even though Jordan is excelling in lead rein classes and is eligible for three more years, she will move onto the first ridden pony *Mahana Sweet Secret* in 2010. Maxine is a strong believer that parents shouldn't keep their children in the lead rein ring if they are capable of riding in the next class up.

"At the end of the season, Jordan will have done three Horse of the Year Shows in lead rein. She was runner up when she turned four and then she took the title the next year. She is getting bored of doing the lead rein classes now and is desperate to start competing in the more demanding categories.

I actually think that many young riders are not leaving the lead rein ring early enough. Some children start late which is fine but the more experienced riders need to move on sooner. I think the reason the 12.2hh ring has become so sparse is because parents are holding their children back. Riders need to get into the more advanced classes as soon as possible otherwise their riding and showing experience goes nowhere."

Vanessa Everton is another well-known figure in the showing community. In recent years, as well as dominating the saddle hunter ring with her imposing bay Thoroughbred *Zion*; she has also enjoyed an enormous amount of success in the lead-rein classes with the stunning *Aranui Chablis*. *Chablis* has claimed the Lead Rein Pony of the Year title at the Horse of the Year Show three times with Lindsay Everton in the saddle and has scooped numerous other championships around the country.

This attractive part-bred Welsh chestnut mare has taken several of Vanessa's children up through the showing ranks. Lindsey started riding her when she was five, before moving into the first ridden ring with *Mirinda Harlequin* and *Mansfield Park Magnolia*. Recently, five-year-old Ashley Everton has taken over the reins of *Chablis*.

"Ponies like *Chablis* are like gold dust," says Vanessa. "She's ideal for the lead rein ring as she's the right size for a child and has impeccable manners. She also has a nice, even rhythm at trot and that all important show ring sparkle."

Schooling for the show ring can be somewhat trickier with the smaller ponies, as there are few adults that are small enough to jump on board for a training session. Vanessa gets around this by doing plenty of groundwork to ensure *Chablis* gets the work she needs.

"I lunge *Chablis* in side reins, to encourage her to work properly from behind and to go in the correct frame," explains Vanessa. "Ashley also rides her regularly on the lunge. The pony's training is always monitored so that she doesn't slip into any bad habits."

"The lunging also helps with getting the voice cues established," adds Vanessa. "*Chablis* will walk, trot and halt, all on voice command. Having that kind of control in the ring is vital as most small riders will not be capable of properly asking for the aids yet."

While manners and performance are important, producers should not lose sight of the fact that the lead rein section is still a showing class. Handler, rider and pony must be turned out to the same high level as any of the larger competitors.

"The handler should be dressed smartly but not over the top," advises Vanessa. "It is best to stick with a classic look. Your skirt could be a nice solid colour, such as navy, and then you could wear a matching jacket. A bit of colour is permissible but the handler should complement and blend in with the pony and rider, not draw attention away from them.

On top of all that, be careful about the material you choose for the handler's outfit," says Vanessa. "It should be weighted material, not something loose fitting and floaty that will get blown around when you run."

The pony should be turned out in a similar fashion to its larger show pony counterparts. A snaffle bridle and coloured browband are

standard tack, with the lead rein attached to the noseband, not the bit. The lead rein should be held loosely in the outside hand.

"Correct feeding and exercise will ensure that your lead rein pony is in the best possible condition for the show ring. It should be gleaming with good health," says Vanessa. "After that it's just a case of plaiting, trimming, grooming and applying those final finishing touches, just as with any other show horse or pony."

Vanessa is impressed with how standards in the lead rein ring have picked up over the years, and sees few glaring mistakes among competitors. The only thing she emphasises is the importance of choosing a potential lead rein pony with a specific list of criteria in mind.

"Some ponies are fantastic in the open ring but aren't quiet enough for the lead rein ring," Vanessa points out. "Others simply don't have the manners or the temperament to carry a very young child. Also, pay attention to the size of your pony as you don't want your rider to be over mounted. The overall picture must be an attractive and harmonious one."

Although ponies often switch between first ridden and lead rein classes, the cross over is sometimes not a successful one. Despite having a similar physical appearance, the way of going does vary. Those excelling in the first ridden class are generally scopier, more forward going and longer striding than the lead rein ponies, to match the increased expertise of their older riders.

Last year, nine year old Georgia Nikora was lucky enough to be paired up with a first ridden pony that ticked all the boxes. She swept the board at the most recent Horse of the Year Show, aboard Pip Wyldar's *Langtree Ulysses*, who was originally brought in from Australia. The duo took out First Ridden Pony Best Rider 8 Years and Under, First Ridden Paced & Mannered Pony over 128cm and not exceeding 138cm and overall First Ridden Pony of the Year.

Georgia's mother, **Kim Bark**, believes that *Langtree Ulysses* or *Max* as he is known at home, encompasses a number of qualities which are vital in the first ridden ring.

"He is very quiet and safe but is a bit more forward going than a lead rein pony," she explains. "He definitely has that show pony presence. It also helps that he was previously shown as an open pony by an older rider. His way of going is impeccable."

Like most individuals involved with the smaller show ponies, Kim agrees that it is not possible to drag a first ridden prospect out of the paddock and expect it to start winning. Correct schooling is paramount.

"A good first ridden pony should go quietly and freely forward with the child clearly in charge," says Kim. "They should also be able to cope with walking and trotting in company, without getting over-excited and naughty. Their role is to generate confidence in the young rider so they are not completely overwhelmed when they get to the open show pony ring.

I also think it's really important for the child to be involved in the training of the pony," adds Kim. "When we leased Max, Georgia rode him every day and schooled him specifically for the show ring. The dedication she had when it came to improving both her own riding and Max's way of going was rewarded in competition. They were a great team."

Kim's final words of advice are no doubt echoed by successful lead rein and first ridden producers up and down the country.

"These rings can be a fantastic stepping stone for future show classes and can improve a child's self-assurance and riding ability no end," says Kim. "Just bear in mind that, as with all classes, where you are placed on the day is down to one judge's opinion. If you can remember to accept every ribbon graciously and keep things fun for both you and your rider, a huge amount of pleasure can be found in the lead rein and first ridden rings."