

Shetland Pony Grand National

Small yet talented competitors race to benefit charities in this fun-filled British tradition.

By Sharon Biggs

December 2007 HI Exclusive

The jockeys dressed in colorful silks mount their racehorses and guide them to the start, anticipation and excitement filling the air around them. Sponsors congregate in the "paddock" hoping their runner will win the day. The race begins and the ponies streak forward from the starting line. The long awaited Shetland Pony Grand National has begun.

Could there really be such a race with Shetland Ponies? There certainly is, and it's one of the most popular events at the annual London International Olympia horse show in December. The ponies are paraded around before the race, just like in Aintree, and there is even a commentator and pretend bookmakers for fun. When the race begins, the nimble ponies gallop at top speed leaping over two-foot jumps designed to resemble steeplechase fences. The young riders even wear jockey silks just like their adult counterparts. The jockey who wins makes history and is the subject of discussion for years to come.

The race is a noncompetitive display, created to benefit charities. Since its inception in 1981, the Shetland Pony Grand National has raised more than half a million dollars for good causes. This year, the children's hospital Great Ormond Street was chosen as the recipient. Money is raised through individuals or companies who sponsor the ponies for a fee. The money then goes directly to the charity.

The race is no free-for-all. British boys and girls between the ages of 9 to 13 (5'1" or shorter) have to work hard to qualify for a coveted place among the 10 runners in the Shetland Pony Grand National. They must compete for a year in riding disciplines such as in jumping, eventing and dressage. Then, they can start the qualifying process, which begins each May at Windsor. There, 40 riders try to prove to the judges that they can control their ponies at top speed and over jumps. Once they make the grade at Windsor, they can compete in qualifiers throughout Great Britain. It's an honor to be in these races, and many top British riders have cut their teeth in the Shetland Grand National, such as James Crowley and Simon Humphries.

"The children must win one race to qualify," says Vivien Hampton, who runs the Shetland Pony Performance Scheme, a program that promotes the use of the Shetland Pony in competition. "The races are two-and-a-half laps over fences. The length of the race depends on the size of the ring. But the ponies do go fast! Qualifying for Olympia is a real prize for the children. They stay in Olympia for the week, so they get that wonderful experience."

Knix Stud has qualified four ponies for the 2007 race. This is a prestigious farm having bred one of the 2006 racers Knix Grand Bobby-Jo, who was born the same day that the Thoroughbred Bobby Joe won the Grand National. "The owners of Bobby Joe gave us his racing silks," says Cathy Nixon, one of the owners of Knix Stud in Yorkshire, England. "He was ridden by Lilly McNabb, and Christy Short has qualified to ride him this year."

The Shetland Pony Grand National is a big crowd-pleaser and is the subject of much media attention, showcased on television every year. The British love racing, both on the flat and over jumps. And with native ponies also much beloved, it was only a matter of time before they united the two.