



Outriders and their pony horses are often overlooked, but it's hard not to notice Christy Hamilton and Fish (short for Goldfish), thanks to his flashy coat and personality.

# FISH: THE LITTLE HORSE THAT COULD

Pony horses are unsung heroes of the racetrack

• By Mary Cage

Christy Hamilton grew up in the sport of horse racing, as her family has always been in the business. Racing, for Hamilton, is a way of life. And for as long as she can remember, she has had a place aboard the back of a pony horse.

"I can remember being six years old and riding a Paint pony horse my grandpa had," Hamilton said. "I would accompany my dad as he galloped the babies they had out at a training center."

But it wasn't until early 2005 that a special pony horse entered her life: an American Quarter Horse registered under the name Lehi Fast Cat. However, at the time, the horse did not seem like anything special. In fact, he did not even look like he would survive.

"My grandpa called me one evening and told me he had bought me a 2-year-old palomino gelding," Hamilton said. "[He told me] that he got him cheap [and] to come over to the house the next day to see what I thought."

Hamilton was in for a shock. Before her eyes was a young, skinny Quarter Horse in extremely poor condition.

"The first time I ever saw Lehi Fast Cat, I asked my grandpa, 'Why? Why did you buy something we are going to have to put down?' Every bone of this poor baby was showing; he was covered from ears to hooves in ticks the size of quarters and he had never had any dental, farrier or vet care."

She knew the gelding would need someone to dedicate the time to caring for him in order for him to recover.

"I had never seen an animal in more need of serious groceries, TLC, and, more than anything,

a friend—someone who would actually care about him," she said.

Hamilton knew she had to help the young horse, so she stepped in and became the friend that he needed.

"My grandpa made me a promise that, within a year, if I didn't like the horse, he would purchase him back from me," she said. "He had paid \$700 for him, and by the time the vet, farrier and dentist were done, I wrote my grandpa a check for \$1,000. Six months later, there was no way on Earth I would have considered getting rid of my man! The

transformation that took place over that year was unbelievable, going from near-death to fat, sassy, dappled out and extremely handsome, if I do say so myself."

Lehi Fast Cat was given the nickname "Fish" shortly after he entered Hamilton's care, a name that stemmed from the palomino's love for water.



Christy Hamilton and Fish have ponied numerous stakes winners, including 2009 Louisiana Derby (G2) winner Friesan Fire.

Terri Cage





### Four-time graded stakes winner and millionaire Prayer for Relief parades at Lone Star Park with Fish.

"Myself and several friends would load up and haul the horses to the lake to ride and swim," Hamilton said. "When we went to swim the first time, he walked right in and was playing in the water. The farther out everyone got, Fish—being the shortest—had to start swimming and he loved it. Since he was a palomino, I started calling him Goldfish, which was later shortened to Fish, [which] has stuck with him ever since. With the looks I get when people ask his name, they think I've lost my mind calling a horse Fish. Some of the expressions are priceless!"

### FISH AT THE TRACK

When Fish was of good enough health, he began ponying young horses with Hamilton at a farm. At five, he graduated to ponying horses at the racetrack during the races. Now 11, Fish accompanies Hamilton in escorting Thoroughbreds—primarily those trained by Steve Asmussen—at various tracks, including Lone Star Park, Oaklawn Park, Remington Park, Sam Houston Race Park and Will Rogers Downs. But his ponying career did not come easily.

"Fish actually was somewhat of a handful," Hamilton said. "He was never unruly, ill-tempered or ill-mannered; he just wanted to go. It took him several years, different bits, tricks, medication, all kinds of things to get to where he wouldn't try to run off with me. Now that he's grown up a little (in terms of age), he doesn't give me grief anymore. Just tack up and go, which is a good thing for me, since I'm generally running a little late."

As Fish has matured, he has proven to be a trusty partner for Hamilton. Although ponying may seem like an easy job, it is far from it. Fish always puts every ounce of effort into his

job to make it less problematic for not only himself, but for Hamilton as well.

"If I thought it was possible, I would say it's like he can read the racehorses' thoughts, because his reaction times when they do something is insanely quick, scary actually, but in a good way," Hamilton said. "There have been several occasions where we've had horses try to suck back away from us and wheel, but Fish is on it so fast, staying right with them [so well] that he's about left me sitting in the dirt. Thankfully, I've remained in my saddle."

Fish has become a familiar sight for visitors at the tracks at which he ponies, as he stands out. But it is not only his golden color that catches the eye; it is his small size and how he perseveres despite being smaller than the energetic Thoroughbreds he escorts.

"He's one of the smaller ponies as far as size; he only stands 15.1 hands," Hamilton said. "We've heard our share of short jokes, only to have them silenced when others see how he works. A racehorse can be lying on him and he has his own way of getting them off of him. If they become tough, he will angle his shoulder to where it's in front of theirs and start to slow them down. What Fish lacks in height, he makes up for in heart, ability and determination."

### A TOUGH LITTLE HORSE

Hamilton remembers an incident that occurred at Remington in 2012 that put Fish's qualities on display.

"We were taking a double for a friend of mine, and the little filly became very unruly and nervous during [the post parade], so to keep from having further issues, we broke past and went on to warm up," Hamilton recalled. "We couldn't have been but a sixteenth of a mile in front of the rest of the field when she decided she was going to buck. In the process, she stumbled, sending her jockey over her ears. The jockey ended up pushing the headstall and blinkers over her head as well. Fish was the greatest; he stayed right with her, side by side, step for step, as I literally bear-hugged this little filly's neck, pushing her to the outside to re-bridle and fix the equipment, not to mention to get the rider back on. It was definitely a sight to see."

"Between the outriders and other pony riders, it was said to be the save of the meet," she added. "Everyone kept telling me what an awesome job I did, but like I told them, it wasn't just me; if I didn't have Fish, there's no telling what would

have happened. He deserved just as much, if not more, credit than I did.”

This incident is just one example of Fish’s outstanding skill and determination. Due to these characteristics, Hamilton can trust the gelding in any situation.

“I’m very fortunate,” she said. “Fish is able to handle whatever comes his way. If I’m aware that we’ve got a nasty, bad, unruly one, I don’t fret because I know he’s going to do his job, work his butt off and not only help me, but make it easier on me and our jockey.”

“If I had to pick, I would say his favorite is when a jockey wants to let their horse step out a little without being turned loose; Fish loves getting to stretch and stride out,” she added.

With Hamilton aboard, Fish has ponied many notable horses, including 2011 Kentucky Derby runner-up Nehro and the graded stakes winners Brethren, Daddy Nose Best, Friesan Fire, It Happened Again, Prayer for Relief, Sabercat and Thiskyhasnolimit. Although the pressure is heightened when ponying horses of high caliber, Hamilton is confident when she is aboard Fish.

“It’s always comforting for me to be on him, because I know he’s going to handle his job, the crowd and whatever I ask of him,” Hamilton said. “I think it’s probably more exciting for me.”

Fish’s personality is another one of his outstanding features. Not only does he have a big heart, but he apparently has a big stomach as well.

“Fish has this baby face, even as he is getting older,” Hamilton said. “When he really wants something, he’ll turn his head around to look at me, cock his head to the side and give the sad puppy dog eyes. So, of course, he wins and I share whatever it is I have with him.”

In their years together, Hamilton and Fish have developed a special bond—a bond that extends beyond the track. From the time Hamilton nursed Fish back to health when he was a young, starving 2-year-old to their current career together on the track, the two have grown inseparable.

“Fish isn’t just a horse or a pony to me; he’s family—my third child if you will,” she said. “He has been one of the most dependable, reliable, hard-working ‘men’ in my life for the past nine years. Not only has he saved my behind many times on the track, he’s always there for me when I need someone to listen.” ★

## GIVING PONY HORSES THEIR DUE



Denis Blake

There are many unsung heroes of the human variety at the racetrack: the gate crew, grooms, hot-walkers, EMTs, veterinarians and jockey valets among them. But there are also equine heroes outside of the obvious racehorses: the outrider horses and lead ponies. They are kicked, they are bit, they are slammed into and they are pushed around. They tolerate the immature 2-year-old, the testy mare, the rambunctious colt and the lazy gelding. Their riders often endure the same difficulties. But these horses also provide guidance and comfort for many racehorses, as well as a best friend for many young children and loyal racetrackers who visit the track.

For racing enthusiasts who frequently watch racing on television or visit the track regularly, a pony horse may become familiar in appearance, but it is rather unusual for a pony horse’s name to be known. The name of the racehorse being ponied is in the program, on the television monitors and in pedigree databases, but the pony is largely anonymous. But for hours upon hours—whether in the morning, afternoon or night—the pony works tirelessly, often encountering unruly racehorses and unpredictable weather. It is time these hard workers receive the recognition they deserve.

To read more about these special horses, look for Mary Cage’s series “Ponies of the Track” on Horse Racing Nation at [www.horseracingnation.com](http://www.horseracingnation.com) or on her blog, Past the Grandstand, at [pastthegrandstand.blogspot.com](http://pastthegrandstand.blogspot.com).

Cage, 18, has been involved with show horses almost her entire life, and she has aspirations to work in the Thoroughbred racing industry as a writer or bloodstock agent.

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