

Many people believe that you buy a horse like you buy any of your other possessions. You look at pictures. You compare prices. You buy what you like best.

Buying a horse is more like choosing a marriage partner than it is like buying a possession. You might have a dream of a blissful life together, but anyone who has been successfully married for a long time knows it takes a lot of work to develop and maintain a partnership.

Three or four generations ago everyone was familiar with horses and livestock. That's not true anymore. It's a BIG jump to go from electronic media, cars and motorcycles to controlling another living creature ten times your size! Even people who rode horses as children become much more tentative as adults.

Regretfully many local horses end up standing around in the owner's backyard. They chew things up and turn hay into manure piles. This wasn't the dream.

In order to realize your dream of actually enjoyably riding your horse, you must take riding lessons. It's not fair to either you or your horse for you to get on when you don't know what you are doing. And don't just go by the advice of friends/neighbors. Chances are they don't know much more than you do.

The same goes for the seller. Why is he selling the horse? The entire story never comes out – not just because the seller's being dishonest. Often it's just that they don't know much more than you do. They are selling the horse because they don't want it any more. Why do they not want it anymore? Again, the full truth is rarely told. Why would you casually take on someone else's problems?

Important Questions to Ask the Seller

Don't "fall in love" at first sight. This is a big

decision. Here are some things you will want to know.

Age. Unless you have successfully trained many horses, do not buy a horse that is not well trained. Horses under the age of seven are rarely seasoned enough for a beginner. A horse over age 20, on the other hand, might present special problems in feeding, shoeing and vet care. If you are willing to take on the potential health problems of a senior citizen (and the fact that his days with you may be numbered), an older horse may be the perfect first horse for you.

Sex. Geldings tend to be more consistent and predictable. Mares are often "opinionated", both with their owners and with other horses. If you plan to own more than one horse, you may have to separate the "bossy" mare. Mares require an owner who is both consistent and firm. After you "work things out" with a mare, they can make sweet companions. Just don't let her take over.

Breed. Many people are prejudiced about the breed of the horse. Any breeder is quick to extol the advantages of his breed. Don't be fooled. Every breed has wonderful individuals. Every breed has stinkers. Buy not the breed but the temperament and the experience.

Temperament. A knowledgeable horse person is quick to recognize the nuances of the horse's personality. Be aware of a horse that is 1) nervous, flighty, 2) bullies the seller around. A horse that appears afraid of his own shadow is not for you.

Health. Ask about past health or lameness problems. Do not invest a lot of money without a vet pre-purchase exam. Take an experienced horse person along to look at the horse. Many health/lameness problems may be a non-issue for the lifestyle of your intended horse. Others may become HUGE headaches for you. Seek professional advice before you buy!

Training. There is no substitute for a horse's experience. What are the qualifications of the person who first trained this horse? (Just because he/she is well qualified doesn't mean the horse is right for you. Ask for the trainers phone number to get their advice on whether the horse is a good fit for you.) If someone's daughter/wife/neighbor started this horse, be wary. A horse's first experiences stay with him for a lifetime. Do you want to take on the mistakes that another beginner made in this horse's training?

Experience. What has this horse been used for? You may not want to show, but a horse that has extensive show experience has a lot of entries on his "resume": trailering, visiting strange places, bathing, clipping, hopefully better training.

If the seller says the horse has been used for "pleasure riding", try to find out if this riding was really a "pleasure". Does the horse ever buck, spook, run away, kick at other horses? The seller may not divulge the whole truth. Look for nonverbal cues. If the seller is selling someone else's horse (daughter, ex-wife, mother) be especially cautious. Where has the horse been ridden? If it was in the corral, is this all you want to do? If the horse was successfully ridden "down the road", that may be a big plus. Riding successfully down a road is pretty hard these days.

If the horse has been ridden extensively on high country trails, ask the seller to name the trails. A horse that really manages these trails crosses water and has had some conditioning. It doesn't mean he will do this for you, but it's a start. Endurance horses tend to be spirited. Competitive trail horses are more sane. Horses that have been used for jumping need vet checks. Former race horses need evidence of re-training. A horse that has been used as a dude string horse may be dead to your

commands. On the other hand, he may be a horse that flunked out of the dude string. Ask all the questions you can.

Price. Do not be lured by a bargain. “A free horse is never free.” There is a reason a horse is priced low. He may have health/lameness problems. He may be untrained. He may be an outlaw. The purchase price is only a small fraction of the total cost of the horse’s upkeep. A high-priced horse, on the other hand, is no guarantee of success either. Horses priced over \$10K tend to require better trained riders. An expensive horse’s value quickly drops after he’s been ridden by a poor/mediocre rider.

Test ride. NEVER ride a horse that the seller refuses to ride. Many people have been killed or maimed for life in this situation. If the seller won’t ride the horse and can’t find someone else to ride him for you, LEAVE. This is no time to show your bravado. The horse may look calm, but he may instantly rear up and fall on top of you or do any number of unpredictable potentially fatal maneuvers. Never ever never ride a horse the seller won’t ride for you. Observe the horse as he is ridden and handled. If the horse doesn’t look pleasurable to you, don’t ride him. Don’t ride him if the rider looks afraid. Be wary of a handler who is abusive toward the horse. If you take riding lessons, you will learn more about how a horse (and rider) should behave.

Trailer. It’s best if you ask that you buy the horse on the condition he can be delivered unharmed to you. If the seller can’t load him, it becomes the seller’s problem. If the horse is injured in transit, you can refuse him. If you plan on taking your horse places, don’t buy a trailer-loading problem.

Standards. The horse should stand still to be groomed, saddled and bridled. Ask to observe these things. The horse should lead quietly. He should accept being tied, have his feet picked

out. The horse should stand still while being mounted. He should respond to your request to walk forward. He should obey the word “whoa”. You should be able to stop and turn him. He shouldn’t toss his head. He shouldn’t pin his ears back, threaten to kick or excessively swish his tail.

Trial period. A reputable seller should allow you to take the horse on a trial period. Perhaps you can lease the horse at the place where he is currently kept. A reputable seller has a vested interest in your happiness with the horse and the horse’s happiness with you.

Life at home. Most horses are a lot different when they move to a new environment. This is where your own personal experience comes in. You should know enough about horses to provide the horse reassurance that things are OK in his new home. You should have ridden a variety of horses in a variety of situations under supervision and instruction. This will give you some of the tools to understand and handle your new horse. Becoming acquainted with a new horse in a calm supervised environment will go a long way in insuring a successful partnership. Just as with a marriage, there will be ups and downs. It’s important for you to spend a lot of time with your new horse and be consistent with him. Never blame the horse. It’s up to YOU to develop the skills to be the intelligent half of this partnership.

There is no substitute for taking riding lessons. You will learn whether 1) you like horses as much as you thought you did, and 2) you have the commitment to give the horse what he deserves, You will develop the balance and skills that will enable you to be successful. The more horses you ride well, the better horseman you will become.

There is no substitute for sound education and experience – for you and for the horse of your dreams. Here’s to many years of happy riding!



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Tips On Buying Your First Horse



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