

Stewardship

THE OWNER HAS A PAT LINE READY WHENEVER someone makes the inevitable comment about how good her twenty-something horse looks for his age—“Don’t look at his hocks!” she’ll say with a laugh.

Under the long, woolly coat, the signs of many miles logged in the competition ring are surely evident. There are a few windpuffs and splints, spavins in the hocks, and the general creakiness of a body that’s worked hard for many years. But most people don’t notice. Instead they see the mischievous spark in the gelding’s eye, the glint to his coat, and the way he puffs

himself up when he's been bathed and trimmed, as if he's headed back to the show ring. They see the way he bosses around the other horses in the pasture, exuding an air of "Don't mess with me, kid—I've seen everything."

The owner sees these things, too, but is also accustomed to looking past them with a critical and caring eye. She makes a mental note to increase the gelding's joint supplement when he seems stiffer than usual or to talk to the farrier about rounding off his toe more when he starts to stumble. She notices that his hearing isn't what it used to be and that he spooks more easily, probably because his eyesight is fading. She keeps a careful eye on his weight, knowing how quickly an elderly horse can get thin under a winter coat and how difficult it can be to put weight back on him.

It can be a lot of work and worry to care for an older horse, but the owner figures it's her chance to return many previous favors. She remembers all the times she got him to a fence too fast, too slow, without enough impulsion, crooked in the approach and he jumped it anyway, even though he had every right to refuse it. She remembers her first clumsy attempts at treating his wounds, nursing him through colic and dealing with lamenesses, and marvels that he survived it all. And she remembers all the silly (and stupid) things the horse good-naturedly endured because she was a teenager who didn't know any better—giving pony rides to dozens of friends, parading on the Fourth of July between "horse-eating" floats and marching bands, carrying the "Headless Horseman" on Halloween....

She owes this horse a great deal. He kept her safe. He taught her how to ride. All of her skills were honed on him, and he often suffered through the "error" part of trial and error before she got it right. Any horse she owns in the future will benefit from the kind, yet firm, way she handles horses on the ground; the soft hands and independent seat she has developed; the ability to read the subtle physical signs a horse shows when he's sick or sore. She learned all of this from the elderly gelding.

More than anything, they are old, good friends. A quiet moment shared in the stall late in the evening, his graying head pushed into

her chest, speaks volumes—things that can't, and don't need to, be expressed in words.

This horse had five owners in the first ten years of his life. The sixth owner has owned him as long as all the others combined. She will care for him until the end, because she feels he is owed that. He gave her what she wanted, the chance to learn and compete. Now he gets what he wants—the chance to eat and sleep his days away in lazy retirement, secure in the fact that his every remaining need will be met. What more could a horse want? What more could an owner give?

Owner, Steward, Caregiver

If your role as keeper of your horse came with a job title, what would it be?

Most horsemen probably refer to themselves as their horses' "owners": after all, under the law, that's what we are. Pets and livestock are considered property; they're bought and sold just like a car, a couch, or a bag of carrots.

One hopes that a horse merits more care and attention than a car or a couch, and that despite the legal definition of the horse as property, ownership means much more. Ownership implies a certain level of responsibility and an inherent value. When you own something, it's your job to take care of it and handle its upkeep and maintenance to protect your investment.

We horse owners know there's more to it than that, of course. Technically, horses are our property, but in reality, they're also our friends and companions.

The term "caregiver" might be more appropriate. It suggests that there's more involved in this relationship than just ownership; there's a level of custody as well. But it still doesn't quite convey the true depth of the partnership between a horse and his human. For those of us who really cherish our horses, there's an emotional investment in addition to a monetary one. We're not just responsible for meeting our horses'

physical needs, such as food, water, shelter, and veterinary care; we're also charged with ensuring they're happy and enjoy their lives and their jobs. We care about them and their well-being. So let's consider the concept of "stewardship" instead.

The role of a steward is probably more similar to that of a parent than an owner or caretaker. Legally, a parent's obligation ends when a child turns eighteen, but that certainly doesn't mean a parent stops caring. We maintain relationships with our parents throughout our lives, still seeking their advice and guidance long after we're physically and financially independent.

Yes, of course, a steward is still responsible for a horse's care and is still his legal owner. But stewardship invokes an ethical responsibility that transcends simply being financially or legally responsible for a horse's care. It's an obligation that doesn't end when a horse reaches a certain age or when a rider moves on to other things.

Grow Old, Go Away?

When you adopt or purchase a puppy or a kitten, you're making a commitment to care for that animal for the rest of her life. You'll enjoy the adorable antics of kitten- or puppyhood and teach your pet to be a well-behaved canine or feline citizen. As middle age settles in, you'll have a well-trained companion with whom you hope to share many years of adventures and close friendship. Old age will eventually encroach, and you'll care for your elderly friend conscientiously through his twilight years. And when the time comes, your faithful buddy will either pass on naturally or be helped along by euthanasia in your final act as a responsible pet owner.

Imagine the outcry from your pet-loving friends, though, if you decided to sell your dog because he is not good at fetching balls or give your cat away because she has gotten too arthritic to jump up on the sofa like she used to. It's simply not done, except in the most extenuating circumstances. Taking ownership of a pet is supposed to be a lifetime commitment.

With horses, though, it has been accepted—and even expected—that an animal will have many owners throughout his lifetime. Horses are usually working animals, and they have a job and a purpose. Just as most people don't spend their entire careers working for the same company, a horse may be best suited for jobs with a variety of owners throughout his "career."

Buying or selling horses isn't inherently wrong if circumstances demand it. Under the right circumstances, it can work out wonderfully for all involved. After all, if horses weren't bought and sold, most of us wouldn't be able to enjoy the experience of horse ownership!

But the buying-and-selling process can go terribly, terribly wrong. Take a walk around the crowded pens at an auction and look at the equine castoffs and see former show- or racehorses who once commanded five-figure prices, ponies who were once cherished childhood friends, and strong, staid draft horses who have spent their entire lives working hard for their owners. At some point in their lives, these horses had perceived "value" and probably had owners who treasured them and cared well for them. Yet at the end of their days, their only value is the price per pound they can command from the slaughter buyers.

Things depreciate. State-of-the-art computers quickly become obsolete. New cars rack up mileage. No matter how high the number on the original price sticker, the monetary value of these objects dwindles over time until it essentially reaches zero. Ten years later, that state-of-the-art computer is a glorified doorstop, and that new car is a junker.

But here's where the concept of stewardship comes in. Unlike inanimate objects we might own, a horse's value should not be pegged solely to how much money someone is willing to pay for him. Other factors influence his worth—memories of a spectacular trail ride through the foothills in autumn, for instance; a wall lined with ribbons the two of you earned together; the feel of his lips and whiskers tickling your hand in search of a treat; the way he nickers softly at you every time you pass his stall.

A horse's monetary value eventually reaches zero. It may happen when he's two or when he's twenty, but it will happen. The significance of being your horse's steward as opposed to "just" his owner is that his value to you doesn't necessarily equal his price tag.

To Sell or to Stay Together

Hey, we're realists— plenty of horse-and-rider combinations are not the stuff of fairy tales. There are practicalities and priorities. Life has a way of rudely intruding and quashing even the best of intentions. Storybook romances end in divorce. The underdog team loses at the buzzer. Bad guys win, and good guys lose.

Selling a horse has traditionally been an accepted part of the horse world and part of the machinery that keeps the horse industry moving. Many horse owners find it emotional and difficult, but they're told this is the way things are done and to follow the advice of traditional "old timers" in the horse world.

If you're reading this book, you're likely to be someone who feels a sense of responsibility toward your horse. You have a deep appreciation for that equine magic, that sense of partnership you get from riding a well-trained horse or the sense of accomplishment you get from learning and progressing in your riding.

There's another level to the connection between horse and human that many owners miss out on, however. Most companion animals don't live nearly as long as their human caretakers. You're lucky if you enjoy a few years with a fish or a hamster. Cats and dogs often live a decade or more, but that's still a pretty short period in human years. Horses, though, routinely live into their twenties, thirties, and beyond. If you choose an equine partner wisely—and with an eye toward the future—your abilities, skills, and talents will complement each other and allow for a long and productive career together. The unique sense of partnership you feel with your equine friend is only heightened the more time you spend together.

There's great satisfaction in being able to reap the benefits of the most productive years of a horse's life—whether those benefits are ribbons or the pleasure and education found through hours in the saddle—and then give something back to that horse as he enters his golden years. But, sadly, it's an aspect of horsemanship that many miss out on completely, even though it's one of the most rewarding.

But by being a responsible steward for your horse, you can minimize the chances that unforeseen circumstances will force you to sell. And if you open your eyes to alternatives other than selling, you might see another level of horsemanship that doesn't involve skill in the saddle.

When the Partnership Is Over

Irreconcilable Differences

Chapter 13 touched on the importance of assessing whether a horse is happy in his work. If it becomes apparent that a horse simply isn't suited to a particular job (whether that job is as an upper-level competition horse or a “babysitter” mount for a young rider), a career change is in everyone's best interest. Neither the horse nor his human is well served by stubbornly trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

Sometimes, too, the partnership between horse and rider just never solidifies—the two simply don't “click.” It's normal for a new horse-and-rider combination to spend a few months getting to know each other and working out the kinks in their relationship, and sometimes professional training can be a great help in solving misunderstandings and communication issues. But in some cases, the two just plain might not be a good match. Riding is supposed to be fun and enjoyable for both horse and rider. If it's not, something needs to change.

But here's where it gets tricky. If you were to sell a car that no longer suited your needs or give an old couch to Goodwill after redecorating, what happened to the car or the couch once it was out of your possession probably wouldn't matter much to you. You took care of it while it was

yours, but if the new owners aren't as conscientious...well, it's their loss, not yours. Right?

Your horse is property under the law, and you're certainly within your rights to sell or give him to someone else. However, he isn't a car or a couch; you're responsible for his well-being. Once you hand his lead rope to someone else, his fate is out of your control.

It may not seem practical to suggest that all horse owners consider their commitment to a horse to be the same kind of lifetime commitment they'd make to a cat or a dog. Horses are large animals that are expensive to keep. Some people don't have the resources to turn a young, healthy horse out to pasture to live out the rest of his days. (Many horse owners can afford only one horse; they must face the terrible dilemma of "retiring" along with their unsound horse or finding a way to keep riding without him.)

A mismatched horse and rider can be downright dangerous, both to themselves and to others. It's not fair to a horse to ask him to perform in a capacity for which he's not suited, and riding is too expensive and time-consuming to pursue if you don't absolutely love it. Sometimes, certain horse-and-rider partnerships are just better off ended.

So what then?

Selling

Perhaps the Quarter Horse mare you hoped would be your trail-riding companion hasn't settled into the bombproof buddy you thought she would. On a cool and windy day, she likes to express her enthusiasm for life with a few "oh-I-feel-so-good!" bucks that leave you clinging to the saddle horn. Her outbursts are never malicious and probably wouldn't bother a stronger rider, but they erode your confidence until you no longer feel safe riding out on the trail—or riding at all.

In this case, selling the horse may be the right option. This isn't the perfect horse for you, but she might be the perfect horse for someone else. In a new home and a new career, your horse might enjoy her work more and

really shine. Selling her will also give you the funds to buy a replacement that might be better suited for your goals and what you want to do.

Once you sell a horse outright, though, you no longer have any control over how she's kept or treated. Her new owners could keep her in conditions you wouldn't approve of or ride her harder than you think appropriate. They could be rough, or even abusive. And eventually they could sell her to someone else, so you might lose track of your old friend completely.

Frankly, no matter how careful you are, selling a horse is a risk—once the horse is out of your control, anything can happen. But there are steps you can take to minimize the chances that the horse you once cherished will end up in an unfortunate situation.

Vetting Goes Both Ways

We've already covered the horse-buying process from the buyer's side. It's time to focus on this transaction from the seller's point of view.

You should approach selling your horse as a sort of interview process for potential owners. It is your responsibility to ensure your horse is going to a home of which you approve, and you may want to include this criterion in your ad.

Be prepared with a list of questions for potential buyers. Ask about their riding experience and whether they have a trainer or other knowledgeable person they can go to for advice. Ask where they plan to keep the horse, and whether he'll get turnout and how much. If possible, visit his potential new home. Ask about the prospective buyer's riding goals and plans. Ask for references.

Pay attention to how the prospective buyer interacts with your horse, both in and out of the saddle. You know your horse's quirks: do you think the buyer will be able to handle them effectively? The buyer might not be able to assess her own riding skills very objectively, but you can.

Also, be as honest with the buyer as you possibly can. Misrepresenting your horse's temperament or abilities isn't the way to find him a home where he'll be a good fit; it's just setting him up to be sold again when

that partnership doesn't work out. Be up-front about any health or training issues he's had, his level of experience, how difficult he is to ride, and his competitive record. You're not doing your horse any favors by pumping up his résumé and putting him in a situation for which he's not suited.

Don't be afraid to seem nosy or distrustful. Above all, don't be afraid to follow your gut. Your horse will thank you for it.

Letting Go...But Not Completely

If the stars are properly aligned, you'll find a buyer for your horse about whom you're actually excited, someone you feel will take excellent care of your friend. Ideally, you'll be happy, not apprehensive, when watching your former horse head down your driveway in his new owner's trailer.

Keep in touch with the buyer and be sure he always has your current contact information. Let the buyer know that you care about this horse and ask to be contacted if things don't work out, or if the buyer ever needs to find the horse a new home.

Many sellers try to work this into their bills of sale by either including a buy-back clause or a right of "first refusal." The first contractually "forbids" the new owner from selling the horse and requires that he be sold only back to you. The second merely reserves the owner's right to have "first dibs" on the horse if he should ever be offered up for sale.

Both methods are a great idea in theory, but, in practice, they're difficult to enforce and shouldn't be relied on. The new owners may pick up and move without notice to you...if not after the first move, perhaps after the second or third relocation. Neither a buy-back clause nor a right of first refusal will do anything to help you track down your horse if the buyer sells him without informing you.

A New Lease on Life

After all this, does the idea of selling your horse make you apprehensive? It should. There's really no way to ensure that your horse won't find his

way into a bad situation. The only way to be sure your horse is always cared for in a manner you find appropriate is to maintain ownership of him.

However, there are ways you can find your horse a new situation for which he might be better suited and still remain his owner.

Leasing a horse allows you to maintain ownership but gives another rider certain responsibilities and privileges. As we said in chapter 4, some leases entail a fee—a rider pays the horse’s owner specifically for the opportunity to ride *that* horse, usually a very talented individual with a top show record. (The rider pays the horse’s expenses—including show expenses—in addition to the riding fee for the opportunity to compete on a horse he could not otherwise afford.) More common is a “free lease,” or “expenses-only” lease, which requires that the lessee pay only certain expenses, such as board, feed, and farrier and veterinary care.

In some ways the lease can be the best of both worlds if you want to be a responsible caretaker. You’re still your horse’s legal owner and are ultimately in charge of his fate, but your horse is partnered with someone better suited to his talents or abilities.

To ensure that a lease works out as intended, be sure to draft an ironclad written lease agreement that spells out each party’s responsibilities. Screen potential lessees as carefully as you would screen potential buyers—and stay involved. If the horse is stabled at a different facility from where you board or live, call the lessee for frequent progress reports and stop by the facility to make sure your horse looks as happy as you want him to be.

As important as a written lease agreement is, it isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on if you don’t keep in touch with your lessee. If you don’t, you could discover he has sold the horse without your permission or, after a few unreturned phone calls, eventually find the lessee and horse are long gone. In such cases (and they do happen), you have very few practical options available to you. It is much better to stay in frequent contact with the lessee and inspect your horse in the flesh on a regular basis.

Donation

For some people, leasing can be rather labor-intensive. Finding the right lessee may take a long time, or you might not find one at all. In cases of partial (or part-time) leasing, you're still shouldering some of the financial burden. If leasing is not feasible for you, but you don't want to sell your horse outright, donating the horse might be a viable option.

Many organizations accept donated horses for use in various programs—mounted police, therapeutic riding programs for the handicapped, and intercollegiate equestrian teams are a few of the most common. In most cases, you have to cede ownership to the organization, but many groups will agree to keep you informed about your horse and give you the opportunity to buy him back or reclaim ownership if he's no longer able to participate in their program. Most do not guarantee that they will keep him once he is no longer useful to their program, however, so if you don't make arrangements for his return to you, he may be sold to the highest bidder when that time comes.

Research the organization thoroughly before signing your horse over to it. Ask for references and ask local veterinarians or trainers for their opinions about the group. Visit the group's facility and speak to the person in charge of caring for the group's horses. Ask about deworming, vaccination, and shoeing schedules. Look at the type and quality of feed offered. Cast a critical eye over the other horses under this group's care; do they look healthy and happy?

Make sure you'll be welcome to visit your horse at any time, and do so. Keep in touch with the people actually caring for him: make sure *they're* aware that you'll take your horse back if he's no longer appropriate for their program.

If you're lucky, an organization in your area with a long-standing, gilt-edged reputation will love your horse, and you can rest assured that your horse is going to a proven good home.

Donation is often a good option for horses who might not be particularly easy to sell to the right buyer. One horse may have great athletic prowess but also have management or riding issues that will

put many buyers off, such as a stable vice or a quirk that requires a certain level of rider skill to deal with. Another may have age and physical issues that don't affect him now but do make him less appealing to buyers who don't want to gamble with potential physical problems down the road.

An organization that accepts donated horses is more willing to work around these issues. College programs may be interested in talented-but-complicated horses since they want to challenge their students' riding skills. Therapeutic riding programs can be a wonderful choice for horses nearing the end of their useful riding careers, because the horse is rarely required to move faster than a walk. In fact, slightly creaky older gentlemen and ladies are in high demand for such programs because they're so quiet and sensible!

Your donation is usually tax-deductible, so you'll enjoy that as a benefit, as well as the knowledge that you're helping a worthwhile program. It's a good feeling to know that your horse is introducing children to the joys of riding or helping a handicapped adult overcome a physical disability.

Nothing Good Lasts Forever

Holding Things Together

Good veterinary care—especially preventive care—helps to keep an equine athlete working comfortably well into middle age and beyond. As a horse gets older, your veterinarian will likely become one of his closest friends! Many therapies and nutritional supplements can help keep a horse sound and comfortable and allow him to continue in his job.

It's not unheard of for horses to continue competing into their late teens, or even early twenties. In 1998 eleven-year-old Megan Moore was a divisional national barrel-racing champion at the Great Lakes Nationals on her horse Deckem Lilly Bug, who, at twenty-eight, was by far the oldest equine winner in the competition. That kind of longevity is unusual, but plenty of horses are comfortable and happy being ridden—and even being in competitions—into their golden years.

In the previous chapter we discussed how riders have to be careful not to let their horses' welfare suffer at the hands of their competitive spirits. Likewise, we have to be cautious that we don't exploit veterinary advancements to the point that a horse becomes Humpty Dumpty: constantly "breaking" and being pieced back together again. If you start to feel as though you're holding your horse together with the veterinary equivalent of duct tape, something is amiss.

Horses are notoriously accident-prone and fragile; if you own any individual horse for any length of time, he's highly likely to sustain a few injuries that require a period of being laid up. It can be something as innocuous as a hoof abscess or as serious and career-threatening as a bowed tendon. Even under the best of care, horses get hurt.

There's a difference, though, between the accidents and injuries that "just happen" (inevitably the week before a show) and an ongoing string of wear-and-tear injuries or repeated flare-ups of chronic conditions.

Pain and injuries are the body's way of forcing us to slow down and take it easy. If your horse's body is speaking up that loudly, listen.

As the person responsible for your horse's well-being, it's up to you to make decisions about his treatment and work/competition schedule. Here's where a good, trusted veterinarian is an invaluable ally, because you need someone to help you understand the full extent of any injury, the horse's prognosis for recovery, and his overall condition. You should explore all treatment options, as well as routine maintenance (such as anti-inflammatories or joint supplements), that can help your older fellow continue to feel comfortable and enjoy his job.

Many older horses do well on maintenance-level doses of anti-inflammatory drugs, such as aspirin or phenylbutazone (Bute). These drugs are usually safe and well tolerated, although they can cause gastric upset and ulcers in some horses, even at low doses.

Such drugs can help alleviate the aches and pains that aren't serious but are common among older horses. They shouldn't be administered except on the advice of a veterinarian, though, and should be given at

a low dose, so the pain-relieving effect isn't so high that it masks pain from a serious injury.

You don't want to medicate your horse to the point that his pain is dulled and then keep riding him as if nothing is wrong while a chronic injury worsens.

When One Door Closes, Another Opens

If it doesn't seem that your horse can physically hold up to the rigors of his current job, or if he simply isn't enjoying his work anymore, it might be time to change his job description.

This doesn't necessarily mean it's time to pull his shoes and turn him out to pasture, although that's certainly something to consider. But exercise is actually quite good for older horses, and it's a good idea to keep them at a constant level of light to moderate fitness as long as possible.

Lightening his workload may be enough to keep him happy and comfortable. Make his daily workouts less strenuous—take more walk breaks and don't ride quite so long. Take more long, lazy trail rides as an alternative to concentrated work in an arena. If you jump, don't do it as frequently, lower the fence standards a hole or two, and cut down on the jump efforts significantly.

Retirement

Some horses are able to be ridden throughout their lives, right until the very end. But for others, there may come a point when they truly cannot hold a "job" anymore. Your horse might incur an injury that makes him permanently lame, or founder, or suffer an illness that makes him unable to perform regular work—even light riding.

As an owner, you must be prepared for this to happen at any point in your horse's life. A well-placed kick from a pasture mate, for example, can lead to a career-ending injury for a horse of any age. But if you own an older horse, the end of your horse's riding life should be at the forefront of your mind.

Horses who are no longer ridden become purely companion animals (albeit very large ones). Keeping a horse solely as a pet has its challenges—horses can be expensive to house and feed. But when a horse has spent a lifetime in service to humans, a proper retirement is his due.

Your horse will tell you if this is what he wants and needs, if you listen carefully. You'll notice that he's ever stiffer when being led out of the stall in the morning. He won't dance at the ends of the reins as you lead him to the mounting block in anticipation of a fun-filled ride. He won't puff himself up with pride when he does something well under saddle: on the contrary, it'll seem that the quality of his performance is on a constant backslide. His performance may seem labored, the joy gone.

You know your horse better than anyone, and he'll tell you quite clearly when he no longer enjoys his work.

Green Fields, Blue Skies

Most retired horses do best with as much turnout as possible, so they can get plenty of leisurely exercise. You need to decide for yourself if your horse would enjoy twenty-four-hour turnout, or if he'd rather be brought in for a few hours a day, either away from heat and insects or out of windy, icy conditions, based on his eagerness to be brought in. Horses are more affected by heat and cold as they age, so if your horse is turned out full time, keep a careful eye on your friend in extreme weather conditions, particularly if access to shelter is limited.

A horse out in a field by himself is hardly ever happy. If you're not fortunate enough to have your own farm, you may find it necessary to change your horse's living arrangements when he takes on his new role as a lawn ornament. Since you're no longer riding him, you might be able to find a boarding facility that provides good care but fewer rider-oriented amenities (after all, why pay a premium price to board at a barn with well-groomed riding arenas you'll never use?) or is less conveniently located for daily visits.

Sometimes a retiree can find a new job as a companion horse. You might ask your horse-loving contacts (including veterinarians and farriers) if they know anyone with a single horse at home who wants a buddy.

There are many farms advertised as retirement facilities for horses around the country, and they do sound idyllic. Your horse can while away his days in a large green pasture with a number of other old cronies. Be sure to check out any such places thoroughly.

You still want to see your retiree regularly, of course. He'll need someone to groom him and doctor his cuts and scrapes. You should also keep a vigilant eye on his body condition, so you're aware of any changes in his health. His teeth may need more regular examination by the veterinarian or equine dentist, due to age-related wear and loss. He may be able to go barefoot, perhaps for the first time in his adult life, but he will still need regular farriery. His vaccination schedule may change if he is not traveling to shows, trail rides, and clinics any longer, but the likelihood of age-related chronic problems (such as Cushing's disease) will increase. Your retiree will never complain, but you will want to stay an engaged, observant owner, whether he is in your backyard or a huge field, as he ages through the years, then slips into decline.

The Final Good-bye

When It's Time to Euthanize

There may come a time when you have to make that final, difficult decision in your horse's best interest. He may sustain an irreparable injury that leaves him in constant pain. He might develop any number of disorders that plague older horses—Cushing's disease, thyroid problems, chronic founder—that are likely to lead to a constant worsening of his physical condition.

As the stewards of our animals, we shoulder the responsibility for making this difficult, yet kind, decision on our animals' behalf. It's a daunting burden to hold a life in your hands, and if you've never had to make the decision before, you might wonder how you'll know when is the right time.

Longtime pet or horse owners will tell you that you'll know when the time is right—you'll just *know*. If a horse stops eating, cannot rise

*Your old-timer
will let you know
when it is time
to say good-bye.*



AMY KOLZOW

or move about comfortably, if he no longer interacts with his herd-mates or seems unresponsive to the ebb and flow of daily life, or develops an illness requiring invasive treatment with little hope of real recovery, take heed. Trust your judgment. Listen to your horse. Ask for the candid advice of a trusted veterinarian. Usually, the answer will be clear. While the decision to euthanize is difficult and fraught with sadness, without a doubt, it's also the kindest decision you'll ever make on your horse's behalf.

The Long Sleep

The preferred method of euthanasia for horses, recommended by The Humane Society of the United States, is administration of a lethal dose of barbiturates in combination with a sedative. These are federally controlled substances administered via intravenous injection by a licensed veterinarian.

Your veterinarian will give the sedative first, and then an overdose of sodium pentobarbital. The barbiturate depresses the central nervous system and leads to respiratory and cardiac arrest; the sedative minimizes the horse's reaction and, ideally, allows the veterinarian to "lay the horse down" without violent thrashing.

The process can be difficult to watch, especially if you're seeing it done for the first time on your own beloved horse. A horse is a large animal who doesn't always fall gently. The horse may exhibit some thrashing, kicking, or twitching, but this is an automatic response and not a sign that he is experiencing pain. Other than inserting the intravenous needle, the process should be painless. You may want a trusted friend, one with whom your horse is familiar but who has less of an emotional attachment, to help the veterinarian in this role—in exchange for your promise to do the same for him.

Although euthanasia by barbiturate overdose is more expensive than other options, since it requires a veterinarian to be present, it is the accepted humane method. You assume financial responsibility for your horse when you purchase him, and this final expense is his just due.

You will also have to make arrangements for disposal of your horse's carcass after euthanasia, which usually entails a separate fee paid to a livestock disposal service. With prior notification, the service will send a truck to the euthanasia site to haul the body to a rendering facility. Your veterinarian can help you make this arrangement. Many horse owners prefer not to witness the removal of the body, and with prior payment of the fee and clear directions to the driver, this can be accomplished.

If local ordinances permit it, and you have—or can hire for a reasonable fee—the heavy equipment required, you can bury your horse on your property. (Note, however, that this now is illegal in some states.)⁶³ You can also have your horse cremated. Veterinary colleges usually perform this service. (Pet cemeteries with crematories typically cannot handle a body the size of a horse's.) Composting, although not legal

in all states, is considered an inexpensive and environmentally sound method of carcass disposal, when undertaken correctly. Landfills may also be an option; each landfill operates under its own policy, and delivery to the landfill also has to be arranged.

An Unacceptable Alternative

Although horsemeat is not consumed in this country, U.S. slaughterhouses historically have processed horses for human consumption overseas. These facilities were often where lame, unwanted, or elderly horses met their end; their owners were more concerned about wringing a few last dollars out of them than with giving their horses a humane end.

From 2000 to 2007, up to one hundred thousand horses were slaughtered in the United States annually, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which oversees this industry and enforces the laws that regulate it. Thousands more were slaughtered in Mexico and Canada, outside USDA's jurisdiction.

Most horses come to slaughterhouses from livestock auctions and sales, where “killer-buyers” purchase them for just a few hundred dollars apiece. These horses are from all walks of equine life—racehorses, children's ponies, show horses, broodmares. Many obviously had loving owners at one point in their lives but have been sold so many times that a caring owner might be a distant memory; others are in such sorry shape that it seems they've never been shown any kindness at all.

There are many humane and ethical concerns regarding the slaughter of horses, and over the past several years, public consciousness and legislation has caught up to what some in the horse world have known for a long time—that many of this country's horses meet their end not at the hands of a veterinarian or peacefully in a field, but at a slaughterhouse.

One of the primary concerns about equine slaughter is the fact that the horses must often be transported long distances to the slaughter facility. A horse sold for slaughter in Florida, for example, historically had to endure a thousand-mile trip crowded into a stock trailer with

strange horses before reaching his final destination in Texas. The horses often fight and injure each other en route.

Legislation has been enacted that was meant to ensure these horses are treated more humanely during their final journey. USDA's regulations require that horses be fed, watered, and rested at least every twenty-eight hours en route, and the use of double-decker trailers to transport horses was outlawed in 2006. Although the legislation was meant to help end some of the abuses horses face in transport, the regulations still leave a lot to be desired and are seldom, if ever, enforced.

Once at the slaughter facility, horses are “stunned” by use of a captive bolt—a gun that shoots a metal rod into the horse’s brain, rendering the horse unconscious. (Horses who are euthanized by barbiturate overdose cannot be safely consumed by humans, so the captive bolt is used instead.) After stunning, the horse is hoisted by one leg from a chain, and his throat is cut. He subsequently bleeds to death and his carcass is processed.

Improper use of the captive bolt during slaughter means that horses may often endure repeated blows with the device and may be improperly stunned as they proceed through slaughter.⁶⁴

Although having a horse euthanized on the farm will likely cost the horse owner a couple of hundred dollars, administering a quiet and humane end should be worth that. Horses who go to slaughter endure a strenuous trip under horrific conditions, and their last moments are filled with fear. For those reasons alone, no conscientious owner should allow a horse for whom she is responsible to go that route.

On an ethical level, caring horsemen simply shouldn’t stand for the idea that it’s acceptable for horses who have spent their lifetimes as servants and companions to humans to be slaughtered for human consumption, and the voices proclaiming that are growing louder and louder.

Federal legislation has been introduced (although not yet passed) that would ban the slaughter of horses for human consumption *and* their export for slaughter. Six states have already outlawed the practice—

California was the first, enacting legislation in 1998; since then, five others have followed suit, and more states are considering a ban.

Slaughter for human consumption is not the same as rendering (which is the process of using the carcasses of dead horses for pet or animal food, or fertilizer). Rendering facilities only accept carcasses (usually animals who have either died of natural causes or have been euthanized with a barbiturate overdose, which makes them unfit for human consumption), not live animals.

Conclusion

As horsemen, we all owe a great debt to the horses on which we've learned and practiced our skills. For some of us, that list of equine partners is very long; for others, it may only contain a few names. Regardless, we all have certain horses whom we remember fondly—that first lesson horse, the first horse you owned, an exceptionally talented horse, or one who was especially kind.

We get nostalgic and reminisce about rides on those horses, and the tricks they pulled or the lessons they taught us. If we have put his fate in the hands of others, we muse aloud, "I wonder whatever happened to him."

The hope, of course, is that those old friends are continuing to thrive at their jobs, teaching new generations of riders, and living to a ripe old age. When their riding days are over, we hope they're living like the horse in the example that began this chapter—simply enjoying being horses after a lifetime of hard work, with a conscientious human looking after them.

A horse may have several owners throughout her lifetime; if just one of those owners is lacking in compassion or a sense of responsibility, that horse's life may suddenly deviate in a direction most of us don't want to think about. She could end up starved or abused. She could be pushed to keep working when she's lame or sore. Her final days might not be spent snoozing in a sunny pasture but crammed into a truck with

a dozen other horses, headed for a slaughterhouse in Mexico. Her final, ignoble end could be on a dinner table in Belgium.

In 2003 it was learned that Ferdinand, the winner of the 1986 Kentucky Derby, likely died at a slaughterhouse in Japan in 2002 after a career at stud. The bright chestnut Thoroughbred won almost \$3.8 million on the racetrack and was the fifth leading money-winner of all time. He certainly had earned his keep, but even his stellar accomplishment wasn't enough to prevent his last owner, a Japanese horse dealer, from sending him to slaughter.

The fact that even a superstar like Ferdinand isn't guaranteed a happy ending only reinforces the importance of stewards for the "mere mortal" horses whose names aren't enshrined in history. Fame and competitive success aren't enough, nor is a cute face or a sweet disposition. Horses rely on people to secure them the final days they deserve.