

Finding Your New Horse

Finding Mr./Ms. Right

WHEN IT COMES TO ACTUALLY LOOKING AT horses and choosing the one who's right for you, you need to resist the urge to be influenced by the "in" breed, striking markings, or a pretty face. ("You can't ride the head!" old horsemen will tell you.) Instead, keep in mind what's really important—temperament, health, conformation, and experience. Only these qualities truly matter when you're in the saddle.

Horses are individuals. Although certain breeds tend to have certain qualities, individual horses are not necessarily defined by their breeds. (We explore the various breeds more thoroughly in chapter 7.) If you loved Walter Farley's book *The Black Stallion*, you might think an Arabian is the best horse for you, but don't necessarily discount the odd-sounding Tennessee Walker/Quarter Horse cross. Sometimes the perfect horse comes in a rather surprising package.

As you venture on your horse-shopping journey, think of yourself as someone conducting interviews for a job, where the horses are the job candidates. Write a mental job description for the position you're seeking to fill, whether it's for a trail/pleasure horse or a competitive mount. As you see and ride different horses, judge how they match up against the job description.

Perhaps the most important attributes to consider are the horse's age and experience, which usually—though not always—go hand-in-hand.

Young, green horses are usually less expensive, but it costs just as much to feed, board, and maintain a green horse as it does an experienced one. You won't have to fix as many problems as you might have with an older horse (a wily, hard-to-catch-in-the-field veteran can be frustrating, day in and day out), but you'll need a talented trainer to help you every step of the way to "make up" your green horse into the partner you want him to be.

Young horses can also be unpredictable—star pupils one day and troublemakers or class clowns the next. Two steps forward, one step back is typical with young horses, which can test all but the most patient of riders.

And although you (or your trainer) generally can get a good idea of where a young horse's talent lies, young animals are works in progress, and there are no guarantees. If your potential eventer won't get his feet wet, your dressage prospect turns ring-sour, or your trail-bound youngster hasn't seen a road he's liked yet, many months of hard work must be lost, chalked up to "experience." You may choose to send your youngster to a new home, putting you back at square one.

Older horses come with their own sets of benefits and drawbacks, of course. With experience can come some wear and tear. These horses are more likely to develop lameness-related issues or to need maintenance, such as joint supplements or injections. They also have fewer years left in their serviceable life span; while you can plan on being partnered with the four-year-old for two decades or more, that won't be the case with an eighteen-year-old schoolmaster. The older the horse, the more likely you'll be the one responsible for caring for him in his well-deserved retirement.

What older horses offer is a “been there, done that” attitude. They've been everywhere and seen everything, their behavior is predictable, and they know their jobs better than you do. The confidence these horses instill and the experience they can provide can be invaluable. They can be a true joy to ride, every ride, bringing you years of happy memories. For many owners, it's worth the higher purchase price and the responsibility of caring for the older horse in retirement.

Another important quality to consider is the horse's temperament, not just under tack, but also on the ground. It's a matter of compatibility—will your horse's personality suit yours? If much of the enjoyment you derive from being around horses comes from interacting with them on the ground, you're unlikely to enjoy owning a standoffish horse who doesn't want to be fussed with in his stall. If the herd clown's antics annoy rather than amuse you, you'll be better off with a horse with a less playful, less engaging personality.

Finally, you want to consider the horse's conformation—how he's put together. Form follows function, and conformation can provide important clues to the horse's future soundness and how well he'll be able to perform in a given job.

Here's where the educated eyes of a trainer or a veterinarian are especially helpful. What looks like an ordinary horse leg to you might make your trainer either gasp in horror or nod in approval. And the leg, arguably, is the key to an average horse's life as an athletic performer.



THE HSUS / CHAD SISNEROS



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These three “Miracle Horses” were part of a load on its way to a slaughter plant when the plant was closed by legal action. In 2007 The HSUS cared for and placed all the surviving horses from this shipment in sanctuaries or adoptive homes. **Horse A** is a twenty-three-year-old Arabian mare. She has a beautiful head and gray color, but an injury or congenital malformation, evidenced by her swayback (the dip behind her withers), rendered her unrideable. Her set back front legs would place strain on their tendons, joints, and ligaments, so she was retired to an equine sanctuary after rescue. **Horse B** was a big, colorfully marked eleven-year-old paint gelding. Although he had a long back and thick, high-set neck—considered conformation faults in a top equine athlete—he had a successful career as a riding horse before an unrelated medical condition put him on the slaughter-bound truck (the condition did not respond to treatment after the horse was rescued, and he was euthanized to prevent his suffering). **Horse C** is a twenty-three-year-old Thoroughbred. He has an athletic build: a well-angled shoulder (facilitating a long, economical stride); well-set neck (and one neither too thick nor too thin); and well-proportioned back, when measured from withers to croup. His withers are slightly higher than his croup, and he has a deep girth area with well-sprung ribs, providing ample room for internal organs such as the heart and lungs.

These photos show that even unkempt horses can be evaluated for conformational strengths and weaknesses.



THE HSUS

This twenty-one-year-old horse, also one of the slaughter-bound “Miracle Horses,” has a more traditional Quarter Horse build, including a well-angled shoulder; larger rump, and well-set neck (although set lower on the body than is the Arabian mare A’s, opposite page). This horse also has an attractive head. Western riders prefer a horse with a slightly higher croup-than-withers conformation, which provides greater power and more “stop.”

The basic premise underlying conformation of the leg is that undue stress can lead to lameness. A horse with very straight, upright pasterns will have a more up-and-down, jarring gait. She is more likely to develop lameness that is exacerbated by increased concussive forces on the limb and joints. A horse with pasterns that are too long and sloping is at greater risk for bowing a tendon due to the increased forces created by the angle of the pastern. There’s a small window that defines “perfect,” and the ability to evaluate these qualities comes with experience, experience, experience.

The way your horse is built not only influences his soundness and the length of time he’ll be serviceable for use in whatever discipline you choose, but also how good he’ll be at it. If your goal is to do dressage, for example, a long-backed horse who’s built slightly “downhill” (rump higher than his withers/shoulders) is likely going to lead to more frustration than success. Such a horse simply isn’t built to carry himself in the way required for dressage. He can do it, and perhaps quite proficiently at the low levels, but it will be more difficult for him than for a shorter-backed, “uphill” horse, for whom the correct carriage is more natural.

Avenues for Horse-Shopping

By now, you've got a reasonably good idea of what you're looking for in your first horse. All that remains is finding your new Mr./Ms. Right.

Be forewarned that this can be a lengthy, time-consuming process, as well as an expensive and aggravating one. Your budget, your patience, and the amount of spare time you have at your disposal will likely influence how you shop. Fortunately, you have quite a few options.

Equine Rescues

The first place we recommend may be the last place you might think of otherwise: an equine rescue. Equine rescues have multiplied in the last ten years, and many horse folk have found them to be great places to go to adopt. Of all the players you will encounter on this important journey, from trainers, to dealers, to individual horse sellers, rescues and rehabilitation/retraining centers are the most likely to have the least reason to push you into a commitment that isn't right for you. It is just as important for them to be sure it's a good match as it is for you, because they deal with the outcomes of bad "fits" every day. Even if you end up not adopting from a rescue, the questions the rescue staff ask and the answers they provide will give you a good baseline for what to expect as you travel from barn to barn in your horse search.

In 2007 thirty-nine states had Internet listings for at least one equine rescue organization. Some states, like California and Texas, had more than ten such facilities. These organizations are all independent, with different criteria for accepting, rehabilitating, and adopting out the horses in their care. Many are non-profits; most require adoption fees, professional (veterinary) references, and/or pre-adoption barn inspections. Many also require, as a stipulation of their adoption criteria, that they be allowed to conduct follow-up visits for a time to ensure that your horse is well cared for. Others may place geographical limitations on adopters or specialize in one breed, such as Thoroughbreds or Arabians. In this way, they are similar to animal shelters and dog-breed rescue organizations.

Horses (including foals and in-foal mares) come into rescues at all ages and from all backgrounds. You may find a former show or race-horse or an untrained horse from a Native Nation in the Western states. Some rescues purchase horses at auction to keep them out of the hands of killer (slaughter) buyers; others may have been granted ownership of horses involved in animal-cruelty actions, including hoarding and starvation cases. Some may accept horses for which their prior owners could not find homes.

Typically a rescue evaluates each horse's soundness and suitability and tries to find a good match with a prospective adopter. Just as with sale horses, some horses may require an experienced rider; others may be beautifully trained. Some are suitable for light riding rather than heavy campaigning over jumps. Others may have been retrained for a particular job or discipline by rescue staff or volunteers. Many rescues have available horses profiled on their websites, and there are online search engines that allow you to view the horses available at rescues in a specific geographical area (the HSUS website www.humanesociety.org has a link to horses available for adoption.)

Rescue staff members want to find the best home for each horse, pony, donkey, or mule, so they will assess your level of experience to determine whether you are a good fit for the skills and temperament of the animal you want to adopt. Be prepared to be patient if the right horse is not available on the first try and keep checking back with rescues, as their inventory changes frequently.

Once you've identified a horse who matches your needs, you are required to complete an adoption application, provide references, and perhaps permit a site visit of the premises where you intend to keep your horse. You shouldn't view this as a challenge of your barn's horse-keeping virtues, but rather as a helpful way of assuring that your horse will receive the care he requires. Sometimes even experienced riders overlook simple horse care needs, and a trained rescue worker can point out deficiencies and give advice to ensure the best future for your horse.

Selling your horse should be a well-thought-out decision, and finding the right home should be a methodical process.



THE HSUS / DEBORAH SALEM

Private Owners

The vast majority of horse sales take place between individuals. An owner might decide to sell because she has outgrown the horse's abilities or because the partnership simply didn't work out. The loss of a job, a pregnancy, a cross-country move, or a divorce might force a sale. Perhaps the owner has decided to stop riding. However events conspire, the end result is that the current owner has decided a horse needs to move on to a new home. How do you connect with these sellers?

The primary route is via advertising. There are homemade fliers at horse shows and tack shops, classified ads in local equine publications, and listings on Internet websites, all offering horses for your perusal.

Horse-for-sale websites, the newest sales tool in a very old business, often offer the most selection and ease of use. These sites might be national or local, and depending on popularity, can have tens of thousands of horses listed, or just a few.

The larger sites offer sophisticated search engines that allow you to select various attributes you're seeking in your new horse; they then return a list of horses that meet your criteria. You can search by price,

breed, age, sex, location, discipline, height, even color. Ads usually include photos and sometimes even videos.

In addition to the mega-size nationwide sites, there are lots of smaller online resources. Some serve only a limited geographical region, such as the Bay Area in California, or focus on a specific discipline, such as eventing. While these sites don't have as many horses listed and might not have search features, their parameters have already done a lot of the work for you if you're in their target audience.

Internet ads are easy to use and are instantaneous, but it can sometimes be difficult to narrow your search appropriately on the larger websites. If the type of horse you're looking for is relatively common, you'll be overwhelmed by a large number of ads that match your criteria. On the other hand, sometimes you can get so specific in your search criteria that you inadvertently eliminate horses that might be just about perfect for you, even if they're not *exactly* what you thought you were looking for.

Before the Internet, everyone advertised in the classified section of various publications, everything from national equine magazines, to breed-specific journals, to local general-interest newspapers. Many equine associations also include classified advertisements in their newsletters.

These publications are still an excellent source, and since many are local or serve only one particular discipline, the ads are more targeted. If you prefer scanning ads to see what catches your eye, you might prefer this method over a website search.

Regardless of the venue where the advertisement appears, remember that an ad is the seller's "pitch" to you—it's designed to make the horse sound as desirable as possible and is based on the seller's judgment of the horse's talents, which may or may not be particularly relevant or accurate. (One person's "dressage prospect" may be another's "trail horse.")

Then there is the old standby, word of mouth. Let everyone in your own horsey circles know you're shopping—your friends, other people at the boarding/lesson barn, the folks at the local tack and feed shops, veterinarians, farriers, and so on. One of them may have a horse for sale; if not, someone may know someone else who does. If you are taking riding

lessons, your instructor may have contacts in the horse community or have seen horses at shows, clinics, or elsewhere who would be worth following up on. He may not be willing or able to evaluate the horse for you, but such information may still make an informal recommendation worth pursuing.

After exploring all these avenues, you are likely to come up with a list of potential equine suitors. Then you need to contact the owners of the horses to ask additional questions, and if a horse sounds promising, make an appointment to see and ride him.

This process can be time-consuming, and it can be frustrating to give up your weekends or take time off work to see horse after horse. If the kind of horse you're looking for isn't very common where you live, you may also find yourself doing a lot of driving. For this reason, many horse shoppers prefer not to deal with individual sellers, but rather go to venues where they have an opportunity to try multiple horses at a time.

Breeders and Trainers

If you know exactly what you want in a horse, sometimes it's worth going directly to the source. For horses, this means shopping with the people who breed horses for a living.

You'll encounter many horses on your search about whom little is known—the age and breed might be a guess, and the horse's previous history might be a complete mystery. When shopping with a breeder, though, you're talking to the person who was there when this horse took his first unsteady steps after being born. The breeder knows not only the horse's sire and dam, but also many other ancestors, going back multiple generations, as well as those horses' accomplishments, strengths, and weaknesses.

Based on knowledge of other members of the breed, a responsible breeder can make an educated guess about how the horse is likely to mature, what he'll be like to ride, and the disciplines in which he might excel. (There are no guarantees, of course!) Some breeders have decades of experience in their breed of choice and have studied genetics and

Choosing a Responsible Breeder

The Humane Society of the United States offers these tips to people choosing a horse breeder.

Responsible breeders:

- Have carefully bred their horses to minimize lameness or conformation issues and have started their horses slowly and correctly in their work.
- Are known to others in the local equestrian community for producing quality horses (and will provide references).
- Do not use feedlot, dealer, or killer-buyer auctions to dispose of unwanted breeding animals, including barren broodmares or unwanted/unsaleable young animals.
- Show a demonstrated commitment to breed improvement, through national breed associations as judges, instructors, competitors, or officials.
- Disclose any genetic health-related issues in the breed or the animal's bloodlines.
- Offer horses in good physical condition with complete veterinary histories.

equine conformation; others may be much less committed to improving the breed and more committed to improving their bottom line. Given the current overpopulation of horses, irresponsible breeders who dispose of unwanted/unsaleable animals should be avoided, regardless of the quality of the horses they offer (see sidebar).

Breeders typically offer for sale rather young horses—most don't keep their stock until maturity, so their animals won't have much experience under saddle. A breeder might have only one or two horses to show you or as many as several horses at once.

While breeders can offer horse shoppers an array of choices with potential, trainers can offer horses who are proven—they'll be in regular structured work and perhaps competing and demonstrating success in

the show ring. Most trainers specialize in a particular discipline, either teaching students or bringing along horses (and sometimes both) in that sport.

The horses in a trainer's barn might be resale projects—horses with potential who were purchased with the intention of giving them additional training and selling them again at a profit—or they might be the horses of students who have decided they need a different mount. Trainers who specialize in sales will also likely have consignment horses who've been sent to their barns for the express purpose of being sold.

Buying a horse from a trainer will likely be more expensive than buying a similar horse from an individual, because the trainer charges a commission to the owner of the horse, which is generally included in the horse's sale price. You're also paying for the trainer's time, use of his facilities, and his expert opinion on the horse.

Trainers and breeders have hung out their professional shingles and should be known to others in your local equestrian community. They may have verifiable competitive or business histories. By doing a little research and asking for recommendations, you'll be able to determine which of these individuals is known for producing and representing quality horses and which should be avoided.

Auctions and Dealers

Anyone can call herself a horse breeder, horse trainer, or horse dealer. Unfortunately, there are no codes of conduct, licensing standards, or professional overseers of people involved in horse sales, other than those who enforce standard consumer-protection laws. It is pretty much caveat emptor throughout the horse industry.

There are two kinds of horse auctions, and although they operate along the same principles, they couldn't be more different.

Elite auctions are where horses are often pre-screened for bloodlines or conformation and only the "best" are accepted to be sold. American Quarter Horse or Arabian auctions are breed-specific examples, while

premium sport horse sales, popular in Europe, attract buyers interested in the dressage and eventing prospects of several registered breeds.

At these auctions, you're usually provided with lots of information about the horses. A catalogue is generally available beforehand with photographs, pedigrees, and detailed descriptions. At some sales, veterinary reports and radiographs (X-rays) are available to buyers. These sales are designed to give buyers an opportunity to see a large number of horses for sale in one location and to give increased exposure to small-time sellers. The sales vary in quality: some have stellar reputations and are known as a source for premium horses. Others might not have quite the same quality of horses or enjoy the same level of respect.

The kind of auction most people are familiar with is the weekly or monthly livestock sale that takes place at a local fairgrounds or auction facility. Such sales might include other animals, such as cattle, pigs, and sheep. These kinds of events are intended for disposing of unwanted horses quickly and easily. Killer buyers and less-than-scrupulous folks who are interested in cheap horses frequent these sales, as do some private buyers.

You can look at the horses beforehand and perhaps watch them being ridden, but rarely are you able to ride one yourself at these venues. You won't usually have the opportunity to have the horse checked out by a veterinarian (except perhaps to draw blood for a Coggins test), and the horses are sold "as is"—if you get the horse home and discover an undisclosed physical problem, you rarely have any recourse.

Nice (that is, sound and well-trained) horses do go through these sales, and if you're educated enough to spot the diamonds in the rough, you can find a quality horse who might be down on his luck or must be unloaded very quickly by a cash-strapped owner. You need a very experienced eye; this isn't an endeavor for a first-time horse buyer.

Horror stories about unscrupulous selling practices at auctions abound. Horses may be drugged to mask serious injuries or behavioral problems. Their training and history may be grossly misrepresented. Because most auctions are so hectic and rushed, potential buyers

have only the seller’s “pitch” and their own quick observations by which to judge an animal.

While not quite as risky as auctions, horse dealers aren’t necessarily suited for first-time buyers either. Dealers are professionals who specialize in buying and reselling horses in quantity. They tend to buy horses cheaply and resell quickly for a profit, large or small. Some dealers are more reputable than others, but in general their horses are likely to have less training and/or natural aptitude than those you would find at an individual barn. Dealers aren’t likely to know much about the horses they’re offering for sale, since they operate with a higher volume of horses, acquire them from a variety of sources, and don’t typically hold on to them for long.

Dealers do offer the opportunity to try several equine candidates in one visit. Local dealers with good reputations for honest business practices—for example, trading a horse who does not work out for another who is more suitable (although not necessarily for the same price)—and have repeat, satisfied customers can offer a selection of good family horses but typically do not offer a wide selection of competition-bound horses.

Unless you’re very experienced or have a trainer or other expert to assist you in your search, you might fare better shopping at another outlet.

How Not to Get Bamboozled

There’s a reason why the term “horse trader” has negative connotations. For as long as horses have been bought and sold, the process has been fraught with dishonesty, deceptive practices, and outright fraud. Older horses with known lameness issues are presented as being young and sound. Horses with volatile temperaments are tranquilized to appear calm and sedate. A seller who only cares about getting a check for the horse will tell you just about anything to convince you to take the animal off his hands.

The horse you purchase isn’t usually backed by a warranty. If you change your mind and decide you and the horse aren’t a good match, you can’t return him. Even if the horse is “defective”—he has a lameness

or behavioral problem, for instance—you have only very minimal protection under the law.

Horse sales are conducted under the ancient edict “let the buyer beware.” Legally, a seller is prohibited from actively and grossly misrepresenting a horse, but you’re only protected if you can prove such deception. Let’s say you look at a prospective Pony Club horse for your daughter. The mare is sweet and quiet, and the seller tells you that his child has ridden the horse with no issues. Your daughter and you both take trial rides on the mare and are enthusiastic about her. You purchase her and take her home.

Two weeks later, the mare’s personality changes completely. She’s aggressive and unruly. You won’t get on her, much less your daughter. You call your veterinarian, who observes that sellers have been known to administer a long-acting tranquilizer to horses that, once it has worn off, reveals the horse’s true demeanor. If you can prove this happened in your case and can document that the seller knew the horse was not at all suitable for a child, you have a viable legal claim against the seller. But how to get such proof? Did you ask for a blood test or even a rudimentary veterinary examination before you purchased the mare?

Although the legal protection for buyers is minimal, sellers may well be required to answer questions truthfully—if you ask if a horse has ever been lame, the seller can’t lie and say no. The seller may have to be honest with the potential buyer about the horse’s abilities, depending on state regulations. If you’re shopping for a jumper and the seller’s horse won’t even step over a pole on the ground, the seller may have to disclose that fact to you. You may want to check with an attorney in your state if you believe the seller has misrepresented the facts in a sale.

Take Advantage of Others’ Expertise

When buying a horse, your legal protection is skimpy at best, and you have to protect yourself by doing your own research, asking the right

questions, and taking the time to judge the suitability of a horse under a variety of circumstances and conditions.

In most cases, as a first-time horse buyer, you simply don't know the questions you should ask or the potential problems for which you should look. Assessing the soundness of a horse or the control issues that are being "managed" with a harsh bit are tasks better left to experienced people. That's why we strongly recommended that you take advantage of the expertise of others so you can navigate the horse-shopping seas more safely.

If you've been working with an instructor or trainer, she may be an excellent resource to help you on your horse-shopping voyage. A trainer has likely bought and sold many horses and knows the ins and outs of the process (although a riding instructor may not have had as much experience in the marketplace as has a trainer). Ideally the instructor or trainer knows you, too, and can help assess which horse will best suit your ability level and needs.

You might want to leave the entire search up to your trainer, including finding appropriate horses to see and try. Or you might prefer to conduct a good portion of the search yourself, scanning the ads and finding horses who sound promising, perhaps even trying them for the first time on your own. If you find a horse you like, you can make a second appointment to go back and try him with your trainer or other expert present.

You'll need to pay your trainer for his time on these shopping excursions, but you're likely to find that it's a tremendous help to have an expert opinion on which to rely. Your trainer's experience can help prevent you from making the mistakes that are common to first-time horse buyers. If you don't have a trainer or instructor, a horse-knowledgeable friend or mentor may be able to offer some general help that will at least prevent you from buying a *completely* inappropriate horse.

The other expert advisor you want to rely on is your veterinarian. Your potential horse's soundness is extremely important, and although there are no guarantees—even a perfectly sound horse can be kicked in the pasture and go lame the day he comes home—you certainly want to

minimize your risk as much as possible. One way to do this is via a pre-purchase veterinary exam.

Commonly referred to as a PPE, this examination should be conducted by a veterinarian of your choosing, *not* the seller's veterinarian. If you don't already have a relationship with a veterinarian, find a practitioner in the area who isn't associated with the seller. Although this can sometimes be a challenge if you're horse-shopping a considerable distance away from home, you want to use a veterinarian who represents your interests, *not* the seller's. (Although if the seller has veterinary records and is willing to make them available to you, those can be helpful.)

A PPE can be as cursory, or as thorough, as you're willing to pay for. A basic PPE includes a physical examination of the horse for any obvious issues, including an examination of the eyes and teeth. Your veterinarian will use the horse's teeth to gauge the animal's age—compare this estimate with what the owner has told you and what is stated on the horse's registration papers (if the owner has them).

This basic examination can often tell you a lot about the horse and her history. By looking at the teeth, your veterinarian can tell if the horse cribs. He can also spot certain old, healed injuries or surgical scars. If the seller hasn't been completely truthful with you, comparing your veterinarian's observations with the information the seller provides will raise a red flag, and you know to proceed with caution.

Your veterinarian will also want to watch the horse jog to see if there is any lameness and then perform joint flexions—individually flexing joints of the leg to stress them, and then watching the horse jog off again to see if he is still sound.

Flexions are not a foolproof indicator of lameness (try holding your own knee in a contorted position for a while and see how soundly you jog afterward). Some horses with known lameness issues don't flex "off" (lame), while other sound horses might, even though the joint in question doesn't seem to cause them any trouble during normal work. Positive flexions, however, can indicate that a joint might be a problem, and you and your veterinarian can decide if you want to pursue further

diagnostics—such as a radiograph or an ultrasound—on any questionable joint.

Many owners who opt for a very thorough PPE have radiographs done on some or all of the important joints. These radiographs will show any arthritic changes or bone chips that might cause problems down the road. Radiographs are not a Magic 8 Ball, however. “Clean” films don’t mean a horse is or will stay sound, and horses who show some trouble spots on their radiographs might stay sound forever.

Some veterinarians are hesitant to do PPEs because even though they stress it’s an *opinion* based on observing the horse on one particular day, and not a guarantee, the purchaser may blame the veterinarian if the horse has a problem later. Don’t expect the veterinarian to predict the future. You’re asking for his assessment of the horse’s *possible* physical issues and of how the horse *might* be expected to hold up for the job he’s intended for.

PPEs, especially very thorough ones, can be quite expensive. Some buyers opt not to do them on very inexpensive horses, since the cost of the exam could rival the purchase price. But a basic PPE is quite affordable, and is an especially good idea for novice horse buyers.

One other expert whose opinion you might want to solicit is a farrier, especially if the horse you’re considering wears special shoes or seems to have problem feet.

A farrier can tell you whether a horse’s bad feet can be helped or how difficult any hoof problems will be to manage. Corrective shoeing can often be quite expensive, so it’s good to know what you’re getting into before you decide to purchase.

Trying a Sale Horse

If you’re a first-time horse buyer, we strongly recommend that you take a trainer or experienced friend along on your first shopping trips, so you can rely on another knowledgeable person to guide you through this process and help you make your decision. But if that’s not possible, we

can offer some general guidelines and tips to help you navigate your way through the process.

Before going to see a horse, talk to the owner (either by phone or via e-mail) and ask some questions. Advertisements are usually short on details, so this is your chance to flesh out the minimal information you have about the horse and prevent you and the seller from wasting your time if the horse isn't what you're looking for.

You might want to ask for a more thorough explanation of what the horse has done so far—if he is in training for a particular discipline, what skills has he learned? If he has competed, how many times, at what levels, and with what placings? Is he reliable out on the trail? Will he go through water (some horses object to crossing streams, for example)? Does he load, clip, and tie? How is he with children? Tailor your questions to the particular horse and your own needs and interests.

If the horse sounds like a good candidate, make an appointment to see and ride him. Be courteous to the seller and make sure you keep the appointment and show up on time, dressed to ride.

The seller might have the horse all tacked up and ready to go, but if not, watch as the horse is groomed, saddled and bridled, and make note of how easy (or difficult) he is to work with. You can also use this time to ask the seller about any unusual tack the horse wears—a strong bit or other gadgets might clue you in to the fact that horse could possibly be difficult to control.

Have the owner or his agent ride the horse first—this will give you a chance to see the horse go at his best with a rider who's familiar with him. Watch everything the rider does and pay close attention to how the horse behaves. These moments are your brief glimpse into how easy this horse is to work with and what his personality is like. Does he lead willingly and politely? Does he stand quietly to be mounted?

Once the rider has mounted and warmed the horse up, ask him to show you everything the horse is capable of doing, whether it's simply walk/trot/canter in both directions or more complicated tasks commensurate with a higher level of training. Does the horse perform willingly with

a happy expression, or does he misbehave and ignore his rider? If he behaves poorly, does the rider try to explain it away with excuses (“He never does this”), blaming the cold, blustery weather or the dog running around next door? Any horse, especially a young or green one, can have an “off” day, but misbehavior is a big warning sign.

After you’ve watched the horse in action, *and if you’ve liked what you’ve seen*, take your turn. Mount the horse unassisted, if possible, and ride in an enclosed area while the seller is present. Ask for—and follow—the owner’s suggestions on how best to ride the horse. Take note of how well the horse responds to your aids, how comfortable he is to ride, and how much you enjoy the experience. (If the ride leaves you grinning, you’ve probably found your horse!) If you have determined that the horse is not suitable before riding him yourself, it is common courtesy to thank the owner and leave. Do not ride a horse you feel is beyond your skill level or is otherwise not a prospective purchase.

Try doing as much as you feel comfortable doing with the horse, being mindful of his own level of stress and fitness—being ridden thoroughly twice in a short time is a lot of work. Ideally, the horse goes as well for you as he did for the owner, but if not, it may be due to your unfamiliarity with each other, your nervousness, or your different level of experience. You have to use your judgment and decide if any issues are a matter of the two of you needing more practice together, or if this is a horse you’re simply not going to be able to ride effectively.

If, at any time during the ride, you feel uncomfortable about the way the horse is behaving, stop and dismount if necessary. You’re under no obligation to impress the seller or attempt more than you feel comfortable doing. Your own safety is the first priority.

A seller might also stop the trial ride if she doesn’t think things are going well. If a seller says, “I don’t think this is a good match,” that’s a polite way of saying that the horse requires more skill than you possess or that you’re otherwise not suited to each other. Don’t be offended—the seller is looking out for both you and the horse. The seller is doing you a valuable service by preventing you from purchasing an inappropriate mount.

With luck, however, you'll have a wonderful ride. If so, ask if you can come back for another ride, before which you can request to tack the horse up yourself, then ride him without the owner riding him first. (The owner should be present throughout the process, however.) This gives you more exposure to the horse's "out of the field/stall" behavior. A second visit is also a good time to ask the seller to show you that the horse loads on a trailer, longes, stands to be clipped and bathed, lifts all feet for the farrier, and can be caught in a field or paddock. Ask if you can participate in these activities, with the owner's supervision.

Take-Home Test

While your veterinarian, farrier, and trainer can all give their assessments of the horse, how you feel about the animal should be the deciding factor. Is this a horse with whom you'll enjoy working? Will you be able to ride him effectively? Does his personality suit yours?

These questions can be difficult to answer after only a half-hour test ride at an unfamiliar facility. If the seller is amenable to the idea, you may want to bring the horse home for a trial period before you buy. This gives you the opportunity to work with the horse on your own turf and without feeling self-conscious in front of the seller. You can ride the horse for several days in a row to see if the two of you get along. Most important, you can get to know the horse's personality. This is a partnership that will be years-long: you want to be sure you're really in love with this horse, not just "in like"!

Before taking a horse home on trial, you should have a very clear agreement with the seller about how long the trial period will be, where the horse will be kept, and what costs will be covered by the potential buyer. The seller might require you to take out a temporary insurance policy on the animal to protect both of you in case of an accident.

Some sellers may be reluctant to allow a horse out on trial, however. This doesn't automatically mean that a seller has something to hide; perhaps he just doesn't want to risk the horse getting hurt or having

any training undone or has had bad experiences with trial periods for previous buyers. If a take-home trial isn't a possibility, the seller at least should be willing to let you ride the horse several times on different occasions. This can be a challenge if the horse is located some distance from your home, but it is well worth the investment in time and travel expenses.

Do Your Homework

There are many charlatans in the horse world who make a living preying on the naiveté of inexperienced buyers. Don't be afraid to insult a seller by asking questions. As long as you phrase them respectfully and don't accuse the seller of trying to cheat you, *any true horseman should be happy to provide accurate answers*. Good sellers are just as concerned about their horse ending up in an appropriate home as you are, after all.

Ask to see any documents that are available for the horse, including her registration papers, the current owner's bill of sale, and any previous veterinary records. Compare the information in the documents—such as the horse's age and breeding or previous veterinary issues—with what the seller has told you. Ask if the seller can provide you with contact information for the horse's previous owner. You can often backtrack through the chain of ownership and glean good information from a horse's previous owners.

If the horse has a competitive record, double-check the results. You can often find show results online or in various equestrian publications. If the horse is registered with a breed or sport association, ask the owner for his registration number, then contact the association in question and ask for a copy of his show record. (If the horse is an ex-racer, you can also get his racing record.) See if there are any long gaps in results that might indicate the horse was “out of commission” for a time and verify that the horse competed at the level the owner claims he did.

When you do decide to buy, sign a sales contract. If the seller provides one, *read* it thoroughly! If not, you can provide your own (many free

examples are available online that you can tailor to your needs). Make sure any ownership papers are transferred to you when you take possession of the horse. The vast majority of sales are straight cash sales, but installment sales, lease-with-option-to-buy sales, and other exotic options are available. The important thing to remember in such transactions is to obtain a written agreement covering the horse's care and the responsibilities and liabilities of all parties during the transition.

Buying a horse can be a complicated and sometimes stressful process, but if you're careful, have competent people to advise you, and deal with reputable sellers, the end result can be a wonderful new horse you can enjoy for many years to come!