

NWHS 101 – March 2006 Issue **Buying a Horse – Pre-Purchase Evaluation**

If you have been following the NWHS 101 articles, you should be ready to actually start looking for your perfect horse. As you reviewed the questions for your “Horse Ownership License”, you have thoroughly evaluated a number of aspects regarding your safety and the safety of the horse. You are set to dedicate time and money to making a great partnership. Now, let’s look at some essential activities for you to pursue in a pre-purchase evaluation, so that the ultimate result is just the right fit!

First, start by reviewing some of the answers you gave in your “Horse Ownership Test” in determining your time, safety, and money issues. At this point you have a pretty clear picture for the type of horse that will be the best for you given your riding abilities, the time you have to dedicate, your budget, your facilities, and *most important* - your motives. As example: If you are a 65 year old women, getting back into riding after 30 some years, you have hopefully determined you need to find mature, experienced horse, that will take care of you and ultimately be your best teacher! So now, how do you find that ideal horse, and then how do you go about evaluating his soundness, education, and match with you?

Sources for Finding “Your” Horse

There are as many sources for finding a horse, as there are opinions about what makes a good one, and how to go about developing that horse! Here are a few sources that I have found useful:

Talk with a friend or a respected instructor in the discipline you are wanting to pursue, and ask them to assist you in finding and evaluating the horse.

Publications and Websites:

- Northwest Horse Source is a great venue for horses for sale, both in print and on their website (www.nwhorsesource.com)
- A number of my clients have found their horse on: www.dreamhorse.com
- The local classified papers are another source, but be careful of horses that sound too good to be true...they usually are!

Pre-Purchase Evaluation

There are two major recommendations I have for accomplishing a pre-purchase evaluation that will greatly improve your success in finding the right horse for you:

Find an experience horse person or instructor that shares your values and principles regarding horsemanship, and ask them to assist you with the evaluation. In the past few years I have been asked to do more and more pre-purchase evaluations. I find that spending a little time in the round pen can tell me a lot about the horse’s attitude, how he handles pressure and release, along with getting a good look at his movements.

I start by working with the horse on the end of a horseman’s halter with 12 ft. lead, which will tell me a lot about the horse’s level of respect, and even more about how he has been handled by the human. I then like to turn the horse loose in the round pen or smaller arena to watch his movement through transitions of gait and speed within the gait, while keeping a close observation of his attitude. In particular I watch his eyes and ears to see if his attention is on me, or does he have “druthers”. (i.e He’d “druther” be some where else than in a round pen with me!) I will use some tools such as a lunge whip, flag, and my lariat to see his level of acceptance for giving to pressure, and how well he might handle the “unexpected”.



The lariat is a useful tool in evaluating horses schooled in a variety of disciplines. It assists in determining their acceptance of our human world, or how they will react to the unexpected.

The final part of the evaluation is actually riding the horse. If he has passed the ground work portion with flying colors, I can almost guarantee he will be acceptable under-saddle, or at least have the aptitude to learn my requests through the aids while riding. At this point I may have some “expectations” for the horse’s capabilities, given the level of training his human claims he may have. In other words, I would expect a 4th level dressage horse to understand my requests for lateral movements, with collection, throughness, balance, and rhythm. I would expect a trail horse to be calm, but willing, etc..



However, I would cut him some slack, in that I may be asking for these movements in a way different from how he was schooled. In this case I would want to watch the owner ride the horse, and then recognize that I may need to learn the queues for this particular horse.

Last, but not least, **YOU SHOULD HANDLE AND RIDE THE HORSE YOURSELF!**

(Conditional: If you are a complete novice, riding for the first time, you should be looking to take lessons prior to purchasing your own horse.)

Don’t fall into the trap of watching the owner ride the horse, and then get him home to discover he is nothing like the beautiful little pussycat you saw at the owner’s barn. *Get on and ride.* Check out his suppleness and his attitude under-saddle. Is he soft and willing, or are there some bracing issues. How smooth are his gaits and transition between gaits? Does his confirmation seem to be a benefit or a deficit? Horses that are more straight in their forequarters/shoulders will probably have a rougher gait. Horses that have weak hocks or poor hock action may have a rough canter or difficulty in accomplishing flowing lateral movement. However, we need to recognize that in evaluating the horse, we are also evaluating how he has been handled and ridden by the human. You want to try to look and feel beyond what is human caused, and recognize the potential of the horse. This is difficult without miles and years under your seat! This is where an experienced instructor or rider can help you immensely with finding just the right fit.

Consulting a veterinarian is the second requirement for having a successful evaluation. Any horse that you are considering buying should have a certificate that lists the tests administered by the veterinarian to evaluate the general health of the horse. You should be present when these tests are given. Personally I like to use a veterinarian other than the one who normally administers to the horse I am considering. However, a verbal consultation with the horse’s doctor is also very useful.

Are You Ready? It’s time to scour the magazines, go on-line, and talk with friends to earnestly start looking for your ideal horse. There is a lot ahead of you, but you are embarking on journey that will change your life...A Horsemanship Journey! Next month we will talk about the importance of ground work...no matter what your discipline or your level of riding. In the meantime, check out the “Rest of the Story” for a more in-depth look at how I use the round pen and lariat in helping me to evaluate the horse’s attitude and movements. (www.tnhorsemanship.com/newsletters/NWHS101)

The “Rest of the Story”

The best resource for giving you more tips on use of the round pen and the lariat as tools to help you evaluate a horse, or as a great refresher for any horse, look up the following two articles, also found on this website within the NEWSLETTERS page:

- NWHS Clinic #4 – Round Pen Logic
- NWHS Clinic #7 – Use of the



Dr. Pat Trindle, DVM Evaluating his family’s herd of horses in Montana.