

Be Smart When Horse Shopping

Paying attention to a horse's behavior as you shop can help you determine if he'll fit your needs and be happy—or if he's meant for someone else.

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Horse shopping was never much trouble for me. When I found the horse appealing and we seemed to click, the deal was done. If the horse was green, I'd teach him solid basics and put plenty of miles on him. If the horse came to me with "problems," I liked the challenge of working through them and seeing him blossom over time. Selecting a horse was simply a matter of following my instincts, and it didn't require much thought or effort. But what if you don't have the time, experience or ability to work with a young, hot or problem-child horse? How can you accurately assess the true temperament and training of a horse you will only see on a few occasions under carefully controlled circumstances?

Before I give you some tips on what to look for, I want to stress that shopping for a horse is a buyer beware endeavor. I have emphasized these words because they are the most important thing to remember while looking for a horse. This may seem obvious, but we often forget that sellers want to sell their horses. I don't mean to imply that sellers are dishonest (although some definitely are), but rather to remind you that their aim is to present horses in the best possible light. There are quite a few who want to be certain their horses go to compatible owners, but there are also some who are looking to unload problems. While some states require the selling party to disclose everything they know, both positive and negative, to a potential buyer, others require sellers to disclose only that which a prospective buyer specifically asks about. Whatever the case, if you are looking at a horse as a purchase prospect and you want to protect yourself (as much as possible) from making a mistake, it's up to you to proceed with caution, ask all the right questions and accurately evaluate the answers and to be an astute observer of horse behavior.

Before you respond to an ad or visit any horses, assess your own needs and write everything down. Ask yourself and your trainer the following questions: How long have you been riding? What level of competition are you at? What breed, sex and age of horse would best suit your plans? Do you need a "schoolmaster" to help you develop your skills? How many young, green horses have you worked with before? Do you have the patience, time and knowledge base for a youngster? How much would you have to spend to get your ideal horse? Can you afford it? Can you afford the professional training of taking on a horse with training or behavior problems? If not, what factors are your priorities and which can you compromise on?

As a rule, young, untrained horses are the least expensive because they are unproven and require extensive time and training. However, if you are short on money but have plenty of free time and experience, such a horse might be right for you. If you don't ride often or are new to riding, or have career or family demands that leave little time for training, by all means spend the extra money and get an experienced horse. Keep in mind that well-trained horses do not have to be expensive. You can find a good horse on a budget if you'd consider an older horse that may be a bit past his peak but may very well be a schoolmaster that can teach you a thing or two.

Once you've narrowed down the ads to answer, you're ready to start looking at horses. Be objective. Don't let your emotions or the horse's color or surface beauty get in the way of an astute and accurate assessment of his basic temperament and training. If you don't think you can do this, bring a horse-savvy friend along to keep you on track, or better yet, bring your trainer and let her help you assess the horse.

Bringing your trainer along is also a good idea if you're unfamiliar with interpreting a horse's mood and personality from his behavior. A complete "dictionary" of equine body language is beyond the scope of this column, but here are a few examples of what you can detect.

Request that the owner not have the horse caught, tacked up or exercised before your arrival. The horse's behavior during catching, leading, grooming, saddling and riding while fresh is important information to have. As you observe the horse, try to assess his general temperament type. Does he rush toward you, ears flattened and teeth gnashing? Then you might be looking at a horse with an aggression problem. He may just need a little love, proper training and consistency to

achieve a brilliant show career, but if that's more than you can realistically handle, you're better off passing him over.

Or does he turn his rear toward you, hiding his head in the corner of the stall? This guy may be burned out. Perhaps he was campaigned too hard and long, or maybe he's become frustrated by being chucked and thumped too often as a lesson or first horse. Are you up to finding out why and rekindling his interest in work?

On the other hand, if the prospect comes up to you eagerly, yet calmly, seeming alert and interested but showing no signs of nervousness (snorting with flared nostrils, wide eyes, ears flicking wildly while he stretches his neck out to see you while keeping his distance), as you catch, halter and lead him out of his stall, you may have found a good choice.

Be aware of the horse's behavior around the seller as well as with you. What is your impression of him as he's being led and groomed? How are his manners during saddling? Does he work well under saddle for his owner, your trainer and you? Watch the horse closely for signs of nervousness or fear, and observe the owner's reactions. These subtleties can tell you a lot about the horse's training foundation and whether it's based on trust, terror or disrespect between owner and horse.

Visit and ride the horse several times, including at least one unannounced visit. Remember you are on the seller's turf and have no way of knowing what was done to prepare the horse for your visit. Maybe he has been longed extensively or ridden hard before your arrival to make him calm and tractable. He might even have been tranquilized or medicated to mask pain or stiffness. You should discuss these possibilities with your vet to determine how to safely proceed and protect yourself. If the seller will agree to a trial period for the horse at your barn prior to the sale, that's a great opportunity for you to learn what the horse is really like.

Proceeding objectively and paying attention to the behavior you observe doesn't eliminate your risk, but you greatly improve your chances of finding a horse you'll enjoy—and that will enjoy you.