

What to do When You're Forced to Sell Your Horse

If hard times means you must give up your horse, here are some words of advice.

Sometimes you willfully make the decision to sell your horse. That young prospect you first bought as an investment might be ready to move on to his next owner. Or you might've progressed beyond your entry-level show horse. But with today's uncertain economy, many horse owners are forced into making this difficult decision. If you're in such a dire predicament, here are a few ideas to consider.

First, figure out if there's any way to avert the crisis. For example, can you cut costs somewhere? We all know monthly horsekeeping fees add up quickly, so look for ways to pinch some pennies. If you board your horse, investigate less expensive facilities, even if you passed them over previously. Maybe they're a little less glamorous, or they don't provide a menu of services, but as long as they aren't abusive or neglectful, they may be a port in your financial storm.

Then, take a good hard look at your horse shoeing bill. Although you might have built a great rapport with your farrier, is there another reputable farrier who charges less? Can your shod horse go barefoot and still remain sound?

Next, take a trip to the feed store. Spend time calculating where you get the most for your money. In other words, shop around. Can you save money by switching from baled hay to cubes or pellets? Does your horse truly need costly supplements? While any changes in feed should be done gradually and with input from your veterinarian, there's no sense wasting money on munchies that aren't absolutely necessary.

Before you completely panic, try to think of creative solutions that will allow you to retain ownership of your horse. That way, when you're better off financially, you don't have to regret a forced sale. One possibility is leasing your horse to someone who will assume most or all of the monthly costs of your horse's upkeep in exchange for riding opportunities. If you link up with a private party, you'll have to find someone who is a good match, skill-wise, for your horse. An alternative is to lease your horse to a riding school. Your horse will have to be suitable for use as a lesson horse, but under the right circumstances it's not a bad option. It's in the best interest of the riding instructor to keep your horse fit, happy and tuned-up. And you might even be able to negotiate for some free lessons in exchange for the use of your horse. With any lease, however, make sure you get a detailed contract stipulating who pays for what and under what conditions the lease can be terminated.

Finally, if you must ultimately sell your horse, try to find just the right person who'll give your horse a proper home. That might mean lowering your price or sifting through an avalanche of offers. But if you price your horse realistically, you'll no doubt end up with at least one person who appreciates your horse the way you do. And then you won't feel quite as sad when you're forced to hand over the reins.