

Why Not Double the Fun?

By Cindy Hale

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On Friday Wally has a re-check with my vet, Jennifer. Hopefully the Magical Abscess Fairy will have come and, "Poof!" We'll be on our way to recovery! However, Marion left a comment after my last blog posting, and shared that her palomino was off from April to September with a hoof abscess. You can imagine how that jolt of reality smacked me upside the head.

So you won't be surprised that my vet, my farrier and even my husband have arrived at a consensus on one thing: I need another horse. Not instead of Wally, but in addition to him. Once we're over this whole abscess ordeal, Wally will probably be more comfortable if I do more riding in the arena and less on the trails, and if I keep his riding schedule to 3 days a week. That's because he's cursed with those thin soles.

I've had two horses here before, and I did enjoy that. Plus I think it was nice for the horses: they each had regularly scheduled days off, and it gave me the opportunity to ride 6 days a week, even if it was for just a 20-minute stroll around the neighborhood. Call it mental health therapy or stress reduction or just a chance to get my mind focused on other things than my health and physical problems, but being able to tack up my horse and head out for a ride is something absolutely necessary to my well being.

And thus begins the Great Horse Hunt.

I am not having fun.

My barometer for judging whether a horse is suitable for me is based on Wally. I want Wally all over again: his flashy looks, his comfortable gaits, his training, his curiosity and boldness on the trails, and even his quirky personality.

What I don't want are his bad feet.

So that has become the deal breaker. Any prospective horse must pass the "Can This Horse Go Barefoot or at Least Not Cost Me a Small Fortune Each Time It's Shod" test. And that, as I'm learning, is a tough test to pass. The world seems heavily populated with horses sporting long toes and low heels, mismatched front feet, shelly hoof walls and all matter of creative shoeing. I respect owners who work with their farriers and vets to maintain the soundness of these horses. I just don't want to own them. Why? Because I've been in that movie already. Numerous times.

To be fair to all the potential Wally Mates I've looked at, I also have a few other criteria. First off, the daring duo of my husband Ron and my vet, Jennifer, will not allow me to purchase anything young or green. It's not that I don't have the experience or skills to finish its training. It's that my husband (understandably) wants to lessen the risks of me getting hurt again. And my vet (understandably) wants me to have better luck at getting a horse that'll stay sound for years and years.

"Get a horse that has proven it can stay sound. Look for a horse that has, for at least several years, been doing what you want it to do," she explained to me yesterday. That was when I asked her opinion on a darling 3-year-old Paint gelding I'd discovered. "I'll be the voice of reason," Jennifer added. "Do not buy that horse. Even if it passes a pre-purchase exam, it hasn't been under saddle long enough to affirm its suitability, soundness-wise, as a trail horse."

She is indeed right. But I really did like that little Paint gelding.

Next I have to have a horse that has enough schooling that it neck reins and responds lightly to pressure from a curb bit. Unfortunately, the paralysis, stiffness and pain in my right arm and upper back has actually gotten worse in the last six months. A horse that leans on the bit or tugs on my hands in a snaffle won't do. These same physical limitations dictate that the prospective horse also has to have comfortable gaits. That's why I'm seriously exploring breeds I've never thought of before: Tennessee Walkers (flat shod, of course), Missouri Foxtrotters and Rocky Mountain horses.

Finally, this elusive second horse has to be located within a certain region. Ron is being such a good sport, chauffeuring me around on these shopping excursions (hey, he's got the checkbook!), but I don't want to stretch my husband's support too far.

"You can't convince me that there isn't a horse for you within a hour or so's drive," Ron told me last weekend. "There are

so many horses out here. Just keep looking."

And so I do.

Periodically I find the whole horse shopping experience soul crushing. That's a useful term I frequently borrow from one of my editor friends, Lesley Ward. I want a horse that's the right horse for me, yet I sincerely also want one that I love. I'm already running low on enthusiasm and patience.

In the meantime, I'm also encountering some rather awkward situations. For example, several times I've looked at horses that were lame. Not 3-legged, head bobbing lame, but a nickel's worth off. On a couple of horses, even Ron nudged me and whispered, "It's lame."

When a husband can tell a horse is lame... it's lame. But I've learned that it's best not to get into a debate with the seller (who's usually also the owner) over the soundness status of their horse, because they truly cannot see that their horse is Not Quite Right. So I simply smile, thank them for their time, and diplomatically explain that their lovely horse just isn't the right match for me. Which, if you think about it, is the truth.

One particular uncomfortable moment occurred due to my horse show judging jobs. Ron recently drove me to look at a strawberry roan mare that, come to find out, I'd judged at a county-rated show. Both the seller and I came to that revelation over the phone.

"You really liked my mare," she said, and gave me the horse's memorable name. "In fact, we won several classes under you that day."

"But I judge hunters," I replied.

"Oh, this mare does everything," the seller said.

Since I recalled the roan horse, and wasn't about to discredit my own taste in judging, I happily went to see the horse. She was very cute and went around the arena and down the trail just fine with the owner. But once I climbed in the saddle, I could tell within about three minutes that the pink hued mare was not the right horse for me. That seemed incomprehensible to the seller: I had liked the horse at the show, why didn't I want to own it?

It took me another three minutes to explain that evaluating a horse from a judge's booth and deciding if it's suitable for its rider, and evaluating a horse from atop its back and deciding whether it was suitable for me to own are two distinctly different determinations.

I also felt a bit uncomfortable-- or maybe startled-- yesterday when I called a stable down south near San Diego that specialized in reining horses. They featured several horses for sale on their website that looked like possibilities. Each one was a well-broke horse that, for one reason or another, wasn't going to make it to The Big Time in reining competition, so it was being marketed as a sensible western trail horse. I began speaking with the stable's assistant, Katie. She told me briefly about each horse, and then I interjected some of my riding history, and how it influenced my criteria in a horse.

There was a pause in the conversation and then Katie asked, "Do you write a blog on the Internet? Because what you're telling me sounds really familiar."

Geez, maybe I should horse hunt under an alias, or wear a disguise!

At least Katie and I had a laugh about our chance meeting over the phone. I doubt that I can coerce Ron in escorting me all the way to that stable, though, since Katie forewarned me that, "We're about two freeway exits from the Mexican border."

I'm quite sure that's outside the Horse Husband Support Range.

Nonetheless, I shall continue in my quest. Somewhere, out there, is a substitute Wally. And I'll know right away when I find it, because I'll be in love, just like I was the very first time I spied Wally and said to my sister, "I'm not leaving without that horse!"

~~~~~As always, I enjoy reading your comments. Just click on "Submit a Comment" below to share your thoughts.



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