BUYING YOUR FIRST HORSE

The Guide to Finding Your Dream Horse

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Introduction

Thanks for purchasing this guide to buying your first horse, and congratulations on starting your journey of horse ownership! Owning a horse is a big responsibility and commitment of time and money, but it is very rewarding as well.

What I hope to provide in this eBook is a solid guide to preparing for and purchasing your first horse. I am going to talk about what to consider before looking at horses, where to look, and who to buy from, how to evaluate a horse for soundness, temperament, and suitability, what to expect in the sale process, and what to do after you buy your first horse. I will also share my personal stories, insights, and lessons learned from 14 years in the horse industry.

After working at numerous barns of varying sizes and at different “levels” of the horse industry, buying and selling a number of my own horses, and having briefly been a partner in an equine marketing company, I am intimately familiar with the equine sales process, as well as the tricks sometimes used that an inexperienced horse person needs to aware of.

Let me begin by telling you a little more about myself. I own and operate a small boarding and training facility in Chester County, PA where I focus on working with young and problem horses, as well as improving my own riding skills and the training of my two mares, Nell and Molly. Previously, I have participated in a variety of disciplines including hunters, jumpers, eventing, endurance, and western riding. My main passion lies in understanding horse behavior, and finding ways to train that are enjoyable for the horse and handler, as well as helping riders learn how to become more balanced, confident, and safe in the saddle. I have the privilege of working with a lot of new riders, as they are just beginning their equestrian journey, and part of this includes helping them through the process of finding and acquiring that first horse.

I have also been just where you are at too, while I was lucky enough that my very first horse was actually given to me, the many horses after that I have purchased from private sellers, dealers, and auctions and I learned from each experience. As we go through the chapters, I hope my own personal stories will help as you look for your own horse and navigate the buying process.

Here is a brief summary of what we’ll be talking about in the following chapters. The first step in this process is knowing what type of horse you want. This will depend on what kind of riding you plan on doing with that horse, what your current skill level is, and what personality traits you enjoy in a horse.

In the second chapter we will discuss the commitment of horse ownership. It is good to know what to expect once you are a horse owner, so we will talk about the time commitments and financial commitment necessary to owning a horse. We will also discuss the difference between boarding with full-care or self-care, and caring for your horse on your own property.
After that, we will go over types of horse sellers, where to look for a horse, and the pros and cons of all these. You will learn how buying from a private seller is vastly different than buying from an auction.

Next, I will give you advice on evaluating your potential horse, and then I will explain what to expect from sales contracts, trials, pre-purchase exams, etc.

Finally, we will go over what you need to learn about horse care and basic training.

Let’s get started!
What Kind of Horse Do You Need?

Now that you are thinking about buying your own horse, the first step is to decide what you want! Horses are different than dogs, to find a dog you could go to the shelter and pick out the cutest one, but using that criterion with a horse could spell disaster. (Even if you are looking for a dog you are better off researching breeds and knowing if you want a puppy or an older dog, for example.)

What Do You Want to Do?

The first factor to consider is what are you planning on doing with your new horse? If you just love trail riding, most horses can do that physically, but if you are aiming to compete successfully in any specific discipline, you will need to find a horse that has the athletic ability to do what you ask. If you find a horse that is well suited to your chosen discipline the training process will generally be easier as well. I will use a personal example on this one. When I was younger, my parents wanted me to get a Rocky Mountain Horse because they loved the coat color of the breed. I was just thrilled to have a horse so I really didn’t care what it was or what it looked like. I ended up with Flame, a gorgeous red chocolate mare with a flaxen blonde mane. We had our issues in the beginning because she was too young for the novice rider I was at the time, but that’s for a different chapter. However, by the time she was going nicely, I had decided I loved jumping. Flame was a great horse, but the Rocky Mountains are a gaited breed, and gaited horses don’t really make jumpers. They can jump, but it doesn’t come easily or naturally. So even though I made it work for a time, Flame would have been happier if I had done what she was good at – gaiting, and I would have enjoyed jumping more on a horse that was built for it.

If you are unsure what breeds are best suited for your discipline, just ask. Go to a horse show and talk to people there, or read magazines written for that discipline. You can also go to online forums and post a question. People love to talk about their horses and will be more than happy to share what breed their horse is and what they enjoy doing with him/her.

What Is Your Current Skill Level?

This is an important one, but also something that many people do not give enough thought to when looking for a horse. I know many novice riders who have fallen in love with a young horse or a spirited horse with known training issues. The only way either of these situations can work is if you are ok with not riding for a long time and you are committed to working consistently with a trainer or a knowledgeable friend who can help you learn and help you train your horse. If you have no expectations and are truly into just the experience of learning about horses maybe this would work for you. But be warned, because if you are a novice handling a horse with either a lack of training or training issues, you are very likely to get hurt, and it can be very frightening and frustrating to deal with a young or problem horse before you have the skills to do so.
It is a better idea to look for a horse that is trained beyond your own skill level. It is much easier to learn how to find your new horse’s “buttons,” then to be learning a new skill yourself and trying to teach that skill to your horse as well. There is no simple 1, 2, 3 method that can be used to train any horse. Every horse is an individual, and it takes experience and practice to learn how to understand horse behavior and problem solve situations. This doesn’t mean that a novice can’t train a horse, just be aware that training and riding involve a lifetime of learning. If you know you tend to be short on patience, then spend the extra time and money to find a horse with a higher level of training. There will always be issues that come up, but a horse that is well suited to your skill level will make your learning process much easier. Also, find a horse that you are comfortable with. It is much harder to learn new skills when you are nervous and tense, so getting a horse that is too young, too forward, or too spooky than what you are comfortable with is only setting yourself up for anxiety and frustration.

On the other hand, if you have more experience riding and training, you may enjoy the journey that comes with training a young horse or re-training a problem horse. Again, I would remind you that it is a long process, especially when you are just learning how to train, so enjoy the process and don’t set unreasonable expectations.

What Type of Ride Do You Like?

The next factor to consider ties right in with your skill level, and it is – what type of ride do you like? Do you enjoy a steady eddie who is the same horse every day and who you can trust completely, or do you like the extra spunk of a hot-blooded breed and are unfazed by the occasional spook or exuberant buck? Personality plays a big role in this as well, if you tend to be a nervous, anxious person you want to find a horse who is calm and unfazed by your emotions, so that you can relax when you’re with your horse. If you tend to be very quiet and meek, you don’t want to choose a horse who is pushy and in your face, or you will be constantly struggling with setting boundaries.

The best way to learn more about what type of horse you like is to interact with a lot of horses. Take lessons and ride different horses. Observe other people riding and note the behavior of their horses. What feels fun to you and what feels stressful? The more time you spend with different horses, the better you will understand what I mean by matching your personality to that of your potential new horse.

Leasing a Horse

If you still have uncertainty about what you want in a horse, or which direction you plan on going with your riding, then leasing might be a good option for you. There are many types of leases that can be done with horses. In some cases, it is for a specified term and the person who leases the horse is responsible for all care just as if they were an owner. In other cases, the lease may be done month-by-month, with the leasee paying a set fee for the right to work with or ride the horse. Leasing can give you a taste of horse ownership and allow you to become
more familiar with riding and what you want in a horse without the commitment of buying. The downside is that you don’t own the horse, so you probably won’t have full control over his/her training and care. Also, if you end up falling in love with the horse, it is the owner’s decision whether or not they will sell him/her to you.

To find a horse for lease, talk to your trainer or others in the area. Sometimes trainers will offer partial leases on their school horses, or will know of owners in their barn who are looking to lease out their horse.
Time Commitments and Financial Commitments of Owning a Horse

Before you buy (or lease) a horse, make sure you are prepared. Owning a horse is a big responsibility and not something that you want to take lightly.

First consider the time commitment. This is big if you are caring for your horse yourself, at your own property or at a self-board facility. Even if you choose to board at a full care facility, you will still need to make time to check on your horse and work on his riding or training. Some horses can go a month without being worked and still be the same horse the next time you ride, but these horses are the exception. Most horses need consistent work and interaction. If you let your horse sit out in the field for weeks or months, you will have some work to do before you go out and jump on for a ride again.

How much is enough? That is a hard question to answer because it will vary on the horse. A young horse will need more consistency, working with him several times a week may be necessary, while once a week may be enough for an older horse to stay consistent in his training. The short answer is that you will get out of it what you put in, meaning the more time you spend with your horse the more you can expect from your horse and the better your riding will be.

Caring for a horse, however, is done twice a day, every day. If your horse is kept outside, you will need to provide fresh water, hay when there is not enough grass, and a concentrated feed if he needs more nutrition. If your horse comes into a stall, you will need to clean out the stall every day. If you keep your horse on your own property, you will also spend time checking and repairing fences and taking care of other maintenance issues. Plus you need to ensure that your property is big enough to keep a horse on. Horses are happier with lots of space to move and will become temperamental if they are cooped in a stall or small paddock all the time. If this is your first horse and you plan on keeping him at your own property, keep in mind that horses are much happier when they have companions. Other horses are the best, but a goat or donkey can also be a companion. Just remember that you will then have to factor in costs and time of caring for the companion as well as for your horse. If you are a novice, I wouldn’t recommend keeping a horse on your own, and if you do, be prepared to do a lot of studying. Horses can be very sensitive animals, and there is a lot to learn about their care to avoid making a mistake and possibly causing a serious illness or injury.

A better option may be to board your horse, as you will have the knowledge and support of the barn manager. There are two basic types of boarding: self-care and full-care. In self-care boarding, the stable owner provides and cares for the facility, but you are responsible for the daily feeding and care of your horse. In full-care boarding, these basic care items should be taken care of for you, but you will pay for it, which brings us to the financial commitment of owning a horse.

Horses are expensive; there is no way around it. If you are boarding somewhere,
you will have a monthly cost in the hundreds of dollars range. I am going to say that $500 is a rough national average of the cost of full board. It is higher at many places. There is a reason boarding is so expensive – it’s because feeding horses is expensive. Even if you have space to keep your horse at your own home, you will still have the expense of feeding your horse, plus you will have the cost of building and maintaining fencing and a barn or shelter. Feeding costs will also vary greatly depending on where you live, but a horse needs to consume roughly 2% of its body weight in forage (grass or hay), and you may also need to feed a concentrate made out of grains or oils if your horse is working hard or has a high metabolism and trouble keeping enough weight on. As a general rule, horses with a slighter build such as thoroughbreds will have more difficulty maintaining a healthy weight, especially over the winter.

Before you start looking at horses, you need to decide where you will keep your new horse once you get him/her. If you are keeping your horse at home, make sure your facilities are in good repair. If you will be boarding, decide on a boarding stable, and make sure they have space available. Depending on the barn you go to, you may have several options for boarding. As we discussed before, full-care generally means that the barn staff will handle all the needs of your horse, while self-care will be less expensive, but there will be a bigger time commitment from you. Some barns also offer field board, where the horse is kept outside with a shelter, this will also be less expensive, and can be a good option for a lot of horses. Talk to the barn owner or manager before you bring your horse so you know exactly what care and what costs are included in your board package.

If you do plan on boarding your horse, visit several barns and make a decision on where you will be taking your horse before you go out and purchase a horse. You want to be able to take your time and make the right decision for your new horse’s home, not be rushed after you have already made the purchase.

Equestrian equipment and supplies also add up, especially with a first horse, because there are so many things you will need to buy! Visit a local tack shop or go online and make a list of what you want and need, but don’t purchase major items like a saddle and bridle before you have actually bought a horse in case it isn’t sized right for your new horse.

The cost of vet and farrier care will be another expense to plan for. The farrier will need to trim your horse’s hooves every 6 weeks on average, and if you keep shoes on your horse, the bill will be much higher. This is another reoccurring expense that you need to account for in your horse budget. Trims are going to average $45, and shoes can be from $100 to $200, or more if you need something extra such as pads, studs, etc. Vet care is also a big one, vaccinations are generally done once a year in the Spring and that cost can vary greatly depending on how much you get done ($100 - $300). However, emergency care is very expensive, and unfortunately, your horse is bound to get injured or sick at some point. If you have a tight budget month to month, I would recommend setting money aside (probably at least $1000) for emergency vet care. You can also purchase equine insurance policies that cover everything from emergency vet care to mortality to
loss of use. If you have a more expensive horse or are very concerned about the cost of emergency care then I would recommend looking into insurance to see if it is a good option for you.

Keep in mind that all the costs I gave above are estimates; they will vary widely depending on where you live and where you go for these services. The best way to get more accurate costs is again, talk to other horse owners in your area. Take the time to research your expenses, because you want to be able to care properly for your new horse.

Before you begin horse shopping, take the time to prepare a budget and plan for when you own your new horse. This is also a good time to decide how much you initially have to spend on a horse. You may want to start looking through classified ads (more on this in the How to Find Your New Horse section) or speak to your riding instructor or trainer, so that you get a feel for how much you will need to spend to get the kind of horse at the level of training you desire. Pricing varies greatly depending on where you live and what you are looking for in a horse. Make sure that when you go out to look at a horse, you have the ability to spend the asking price or very close to it. While negotiating on price is very common, nothing is more frustrating to a seller than a buyer who comes out and looks at a horse then announces they can only spend half of what the asking price is.
Process of Buying

Before we get into the details of where to look for a horse, types of sellers, and evaluating your potential horse, let me take a minute to walk you through a typical horse purchase. You start by spreading the word that you are looking for a horse to do x, y, z with and you want a quiet, easy disposition (or maybe you want a hot horse that needs re-training – whatever you decide after reading through the “What Type of Horse do you Need” section of this book and doing some soul searching.) After telling your horse friends, your instructor, and probably putting it on Facebook, you start searching online and print classifieds. You find a horse that you like, or maybe a few, and go out to meet the horses and try riding them. After deciding on the chosen horse, you will make the seller an offer (or accept their asking price, but negotiating is common with horse sales). When a price is agreed upon, you may choose to ask for a trial and or have a vetting done on the horse – more on these later – after any agreed upon trial periods are up and vet checks are satisfactory, you and the seller will both sign an agreement of sale, make any registration transfers that are necessary, and the deal is done. Now that you have an idea of the timeline of this process, let’s break it down and get into the details.
Who Sells Horses?

We’ll start with who sells horses and what the differences are between these types of sellers. The most common one is the private seller. This is simply the person who originally bought the horse and now had decided to sell him or her. Perhaps the horse was not a good fit for this person, or maybe the person can no longer afford a horse. There are numerous reasons why people sell horses and it is a good idea to ask a private seller why they are selling. You may not want to completely trust their answer, but it’s still a good question to ask.

As with every type of horse seller, there are pros and cons to buying privately. The upside is you may find someone’s prized horse, which has been well cared for and well trained. Private sellers will know the most about their horses and can usually give you the most history on the horse. They may want to keep in touch after the sale and can give you valuable insights on the horse’s behavior and training. The downside of buying private is that the seller may not understand the normal procedure of a sale, and may not be professional about the process. Also, you will be at the mercy of the seller’s facility to look at and try the horse, especially if you are not doing a trial. The seller may have a gorgeous farm with a spacious arena, or they may have a half-acre mud pit in their back yard.

If a private seller decides they don't want to deal with the process of selling their horse, they may send them to a trainer to be sold. This is very common, and is usually done with horses that have quality breeding or are already trained in a particular discipline. Trainers that offer horse marketing and sales offer a very valuable service. Think of it as listing your home as for sale by owner vs. listing with a real estate broker. The trainer knows where to advertise the horse, how to best price the horse, and has a personal network to find the right match for the seller’s horse. In exchange for their service, the trainer collects either a marketing fee or a commission or both. You can and should expect a more professional experience when dealing with a trainer. A trainer may also have multiple horses for you to look at, and if they are good at instructing riders as well, they may be able to help you understand how to best handle and ride the horse you are looking at. The downside of buying through a trainer is that they may not have much history on the horse and may not have known the horse for more than a few days or a few weeks, if the horse came to their facility simply for the purpose of marketing. Also, if there are several trainers involved in the deal, for example your trainer took you to look at a horse for sale with another trainer, they may both be receiving a commission on the sale, which means you are paying a higher price for the horse. Again, these trainers are usually providing a valuable service and deserve to get paid, but most people don’t usually know that the sale works this way. It is not as transparent as with, say, a real estate transaction. (By the way, I have my real estate license and worked in residential sales for two years. That’s why I keep using the real estate examples!)

There is another type of horse seller – a dealer. Horse dealers buy and sell lots of horses. They will frequently buy horses at an auction in one state, and then sell them in another state either privately or at another auction. Generally, dealers
do not have the horses very long; they buy horses to “flip” them quickly to a buyer. Dealers will also buy horses from private sellers that want to move their horse quickly and will take a cheap price. There are certainly exceptions, but as a general rule, it’s buyer beware when looking at horses from a dealer. You can find a good horse at a lower price, and I personally know several people who have gotten “diamonds in the rough” horses from dealers, but if you are a novice, consider taking someone who is very experienced in evaluating horses if you are going to a dealer. Be sure to quarantine any horse that comes from a dealer, as these horses have often moved several times recently and there is a higher probability they could have contracted something. Here’s another thing about dealers – they will often offer a guarantee of sorts, that if the horse you buy from them does not work out, they will give you another one. This may sound good at first and it can work out well for the buyer in some cases, but keep in mind that the “replacement” horse you get will be just as much of a gamble because the seller is not likely to have any more history on this horse than they did on the first one.

Horse auctions are another way to find a horse. Horse auctions vary widely in quality. Some auctions feature very well bred, well cared for horses that are being sold by breeders or private owners. These are usually the breed or discipline specific auctions. Other auctions may allow horses to be sold that are lame, sick, or have severe behavior issues. These lower end auctions are often the last stop for many horses because there is no other place their owner can sell them. The sad truth is that there will be bidders at these auctions who are buying horses for slaughter. Many horses at these low-end auctions are drugged to hide lameness or behavior problems. I have several horses at my farm that were bought at auctions such as these, and turned out to be great horses, but every one of them had some sort of issue that I needed to work through. For this reason, I don’t recommend that people buy from an auction unless you are very experienced handling horses.

For example, my current horse, Nell, was from a low-end auction. Even though her coat was rough and she had a swollen leg, her conformation was decent, I liked the look in her eye, and I knew I could work on her attitude (she pinned her ears every time anyone got close). Her problem was that she had been ridden very roughly with spurs and a harsh bit, so even a slight touch with my leg would make her tense up and pin her ears. She would brace and rush forward when I took any contact with the reins. I was able to retrain her, but it took a while, and I had to ride some bucks and dodge a few kicks during that time. I could go on with numerous stories such as this one. As I have said before, all my auction horses worked out but it took a lot of time and patience.

Personally, I don’t frequent auctions because the horses tug at my heart and I just find the whole atmosphere disturbing. Depending on your personality, you may set yourself up for disappointment by looking for a horse at one of these auctions because it is easy to make an impulse buy to rescue a horse, but then be stuck with a horse that is a very poor fit for you as a rider. That’s another negative of auctions, there is usually almost no space to ride the horse, and it can be tough, if not impossible to find any information or history on a horse.
This brings me to another place where you can find a horse and that is a rescue facility. A lot of rescues are breed specific and there are many rescues for retired racehorses, standardbreds, and especially off the track thoroughbreds (abbreviated OTTB). Rescuing a horse is great, but I am going to say again that it is not the best for beginners. Most rescued horses, and especially racehorses are going to have a lot of mental baggage and “triggers.” Just as people can see something or smell something and it reminds them of a past event or feeling, horses experience the same thing. Being at the racetrack is a stressful, adrenaline filled experience for a horse, so they are likely to become anxious and temperamental when something happens to trigger a memory of those experiences. OTTBs can be wonderful horses and can excel at many disciplines, but a lot of people who are not well matched with an ex-racehorse end up with them simply because they are cheap and there are many available. Just remember that it is not worth getting a horse that is beyond your skills and abilities as a handler and rider; it puts you in danger and it is no service to the horse, which may just need to be sold again down the road.

That said, rescue horses can also be similar to auction horses in that you don’t know much about their past, so proceed with caution. A horse’s temperament is created first by breed and genetics, but will also be greatly influenced by the handling and training they have received throughout their life.

This concludes the main types of horse sellers, now let’s get into where to find your new horse, and specifically where to find horses for sale by private sellers and trainers, as these are the best to buy from for most people.
How to Find Your New Horse

The best place to start your horse search is by spreading the word. It’s nice when you can find a horse for sale that is owned by a friend, or someone a friend knows and recommends. This goes without saying, but if you are working with a trainer or riding instructor, make sure you talk to them about your horse search and enlist their help in finding the right horse. The next place to pursue your horse search is through classifieds. There are several online sites that I use and recommend, specifically dreamhorse.com and equine.com. There are many other horse classified sites out there, but because sellers need to pay to list their horses on these two (or at least put a photo on Dreamhorse) they are typically of better quality, with more complete ads. Two of the better free classifieds sites are horseclicks.com and equinenow.com. I should clarify that the browsing buyer does not need to pay to use any of these sites, only sellers posting horses.

Each of the sites I mentioned has an advanced search feature where you can narrow results according to size, age, breed, discipline, and price. You can also add a zip code search, where you simply set the search results to show horses within a radius of however many miles you are willing to drive. The description of each horse on these online classifieds will also have a temperament rating set by the seller. This is usually a 1-10 scale, where 1 is a quiet, easy horse, and 10 is a hot, hard to handle steed. This temperament scale is useful, but keep in mind that it is subjective. The seller’s idea of quiet and easy may be different than yours.

If you live in an area with a large horse community, there may be local publications available that list horse classifieds. These can be useful as well, and some people prefer browsing through a newspaper or magazine than searching online. Prepare to do just that though – browse – as print classifieds are not organized by age, breed, or price as online classifieds are. Generally, there will not be as much information on the horse in print classifieds and you don’t have instant access to multiple pictures and video links of the horse as you often do online. You can find these publications at local tack shops, who may also have a bulletin board where people post flyers of available horses.

After you have picked out a few horses that look interesting, call or email the seller to ask questions that may not have been answered by the horse’s ad. A few things that are often omitted from ads and are good to ask are: Does the horse have any vices? (Vices include cribbing, weaving, wood chewing, etc.) What vaccines does the horse have? Do you have any medical records on the horse? Does he wear shoes on just the front, all around, or is he barefoot?

One thing to remember before you do ask these questions of the seller – make sure you have read the ad. As a seller, it is very frustrating when the above information is clearly explained in the ad, and a buyer still sends questions asking given information. Another question I recommend asking is why the horse is being sold, and if the person you are communicating with is the seller. This way you will know if you are dealing with a private seller who is the actual owner of the horse, or a trainer or other person who is marketing the horse for the owner.
Once you have talked to the seller and had any questions answered, it’s time to go out and look at your potential horse in person.

*Just wanted to mention that some people have bought horses over the Internet without ever looking at them. I have personally never done this and would not feel comfortable doing this. I need to meet a horse in person to see if I like their personality. Of the people I know who have bought horses sight unseen, some have been lucky and gotten great horses, others have not been so lucky and ended up with horses that were unsound or needed a lot more training than expected. I would caution that if you do consider buying a horse without seeing them in person, only do so from a person you know and trust.
Evaluating a Horse

Most times that you go out to look at a horse for sale, the seller will have them in the barn, cleaned up, and maybe even tacked up ready to ride. If you have concerns about the horse’s ground manners, ask to catch them in their field or stall, so you can see more of what the horse is like during day to day handling.

When you do go out to look at your potential new horse, start by getting a feel of the horse’s personality. Is he sulking at the back of the stall, or does he have his head out ready to greet everyone? When he is on the crossties or tied elsewhere, does he stand quietly or dance around nervously? When you look at his eye, do you get the impression he is gentle and kind, alert and inquisitive, sullen, or nervous and on edge. Also note how you feel around the horse, are you comfortable and relaxed or does something about the horse make you apprehensive? Sometimes you have to go with your instincts, and if something about the horse or the deal just doesn’t feel right, it’s better to keep looking.

As the seller tacks up the horse, notice how the horse responds to that as well. If he starts fidgeting as soon as the saddle comes out, he could have back soreness or could be nervous about being ridden. Same with the girth, if the horse tosses his head or pins his ears when the girth is tightened, it could signal that he is sore or it could just be a habit. Ask if you can spend a minute grooming the horse or at least running your hands over him before you ride. Look for areas where he may be sensitive to pressure from the brush or your hand, again indicating soreness. Run your hands down each leg to feel for heat or swelling. You will then do the same thing after the horse is ridden or worked to see if anything has changed.

Besides evaluating the prospect’s temperament, you also want to consider his conformation, and whether he is suited to the type of riding or work you do, and if there is anything about how he is built that pre-disposes him to problems down the road. I will give you some outside references to go deeper on this subject, but we’ll go over the basics here.

Start by standing back and looking at the horse from the side. Does he look proportionate? Ideally, you should be able to separate a horse’s body into three parts, shoulder, abdomen, and hindquarters, with all being close to the same length. If a horse’s back is too long, he will have difficulty collecting and is not as well equipped to carry the weight of a rider. Next look at his topline – is it level and does his neck appear well muscled and elegant? Are his hip and shoulder long and sloping, or do they appear short and upright? All these things will affect how the horse moves and whether his gait is flowing and smooth to ride, or if it feels jarring and choppy.

The next important parts of a horse to examine are his legs and hooves. The horse’s legs carry a lot of weight and are put under quite a lot of physical stress in many equestrian disciplines, so the legs are where lameness problems are most often found. When viewed from the front, the legs should appear straight, with the joints lined up so that there is equal weight bearing. Viewed from the side,
the knee and pastern should align on the front leg, and the hock and pastern on the hind leg. Pasterns should be sloping, not too long or too short. Hooves should appear well balanced and should have the same slope as the pastern. I have a short video posted on my blog, where I talk about the conformation of my two horses, Nell and Molly. Watch it here and you will better understand how to size up a horse’s conformation:


Remember that a conformation fault doesn’t necessarily mean the horse you are looking at is not the right one; it is difficult to find a horse with ideal conformation. However, having the knowledge to spot potential problems is a big asset and can help you ask intelligent questions when you have the pre-purchase exam done. If you do not plan on doing a pre-purchase exam, then knowledge of conformation, and the ability to see even subtle lameness is a must.

There is one more topic I want to cover on examining a horse, and that is the idea that you can draw conclusions about a horse’s personality and temperament by looking at the shape of their head and the swirls on their face. This is a controversial subject and I personally have never “ruled out” a horse due to any of these factors, but I wanted to at least educate you on the theories so you are well informed. A broad forehead with eyes set apart and a straight refined muzzle are thought to indicate intelligence, while eyes set too close and a roman nose is supposedly indicative of a stubborn, willful horse. This is where the profile of the horse’s face appears somewhat convex. See the picture below.

Another interesting item that many horseman will examine are the swirls on a horse’s face and neck. Examining hair patterns on a horse has been done for centuries, and several recent studies have given this theory more credibility, however I still would not rely on it solely. The basic idea is that a single swirl between the eyes means a calm, intelligent horse. Two swirls signal a more complicated personality. A swirl extending below the eyes means the horse is friendly and agreeable, where a swirl or swirls higher on the forehead warn of a sensitive, reactive animal. As I mentioned before, I would not use these methods of determining the nature of a horse as deciding factors in your decision on a
horse, but they are interesting theories and I wanted to touch on them. If you have more interest in the swirl theory, go here:

http://www.crktrainingblog.com/whats-in-a-swirl/

Riding the Horse

Watch someone else ride the horse first. There are several reasons for this. Number one, you can see how the horse is ridden, do they ride him with loose reins and light cues, or does the rider stay heavy on the horse’s mouth and use a lot of leg? Watch how he reacts, or doesn't react, to his rider's cues. Note his overall demeanor – is he relaxed and moving freely under saddle, or does he appear tense and hollow? Don’t be timid in asking the rider to show you what the horse knows. If he was advertised as having auto lead changes, ask to see him do a lead change. Also, make sure you are watching for signs of lameness as the horse is being ridden. Does he appear sore as he moves? Or can you pick up on a more subtle indication of unsoundness such as refusing to pick up a particular canter lead or taking an off step every time through a particular turn?

If you are a novice rider, pay attention to how comfortable you feel watching the horse. If you feel very nervous or are unsure of your ability to ride this particular horse, politely say so and move on. This is a much better outcome for both you and the seller than if you get on a horse that is too much for you to ride and end up having an accident. As a new rider, you want to feel comfortable and safe with your new horse, this is imperative to your success and enjoyment of riding.

When you do get on the horse, spend a few minutes just getting used to the horse and figuring out what he responds to. Personally, I will spend a few minutes on the ground doing this even before I mount up, just leading him and asking him to do a few simple things from the ground to see how focused and responsive he is. When you do start riding, pay attention and try to figure out how the horse is trained and what he responds to. Does he listen to your seat? How much leg do you need? Is he soft in the bridle or does he brace when you take contact with the reins? This is not the time to retrain the horse in the way you want to ride, this is where you need to figure out how this horse is accustomed to being ridden and then decide if you like the way they go or if you can train them to your style of riding. Remember that you are trying a horse for sale, you are not schooling it for the owner, nor are you taking a riding lesson. Only do what you know how to do and are comfortable with. If you have never jumped 3’, I wouldn’t recommend trying it now just because you are on a horse that can. Pushing your own skill limits should be done later, probably when you are working with your own trainer, not trying out a horse.

If everything has gone well up to this point, it’s time to seriously think about whether the horse you are trying will suit your needs in the future. This is especially true if you plan on showing at a specific level, or are a novice rider but are quickly progressing in your skills. If you want a horse to go out and do the 3’6” jumpers with or to move up in the dressage levels, you need to make sure that you find a horse who is already doing that, or a prospect that has the
athleticism necessary for that level of performance. A thorough evaluation of soundness will also be very important when choosing a horse for performance. If you are more interested in finding a quiet companion for light trail riding and groundwork, then you will not need to give as much consideration to soundness and athleticism. Also remember, if you are a novice, that the old schoolmaster type may suit you very well now, but if you are learning quickly, you may be bored with a steady eddie after a few months. As we discussed in a previous section, take the time to talk to other riders, observe and ride as many other horses as possible, so that you know what you want!

Price

Typically, price is discussed before a pre-purchase exam and trial are scheduled, so we will talk about that next. As I mentioned before, prices will vary a lot depending on where you live and what type of horse you are looking at it, but you should have looked at enough classified ads and maybe enough horses in person to have a feel for what the going price is for a horse of the type, training level, and temperament that you are looking at. If you feel that the horse is overpriced, it is completely reasonable to make an offer to the seller. Most horses are priced higher than what the seller actually plans on getting for the horse. Keep in mind that with horses, and especially with private sellers, the price and perceived value of the horse can be very emotional; meaning that you may offend the seller if you give them a random low ball offer. I have found that the best way to get a deal done smoothly is to be reasonable and make it win-win for both buyer and seller.

Once a price is agreed upon, the sale may be contingent on a pre-purchase exam and possibly a trial, which we will discuss next. At this point, you will usually provide a deposit so the seller is more comfortable holding the horse and not showing him to any other buyers as you do your “due diligence.” A deposit is common if the horse is staying with the seller, or paying in full is more common if you are moving the horse to your facility for a trial and pre-purchase exam. Either way, make sure that your agreement with the seller is documented and you have a receipt for any cash that changed hands.

*Just a note here on free horses. I evaluate a free horse just as one I am paying fair price for. You don't want to get stuck with a horse that has lameness, health, or behavioral issues. As a barn owner and a trainer, I actually get quite a few offers of free horses, but I rarely take one. There is usually a reason a horse is free; that being said, there are obviously exceptions. As I mentioned earlier, my first horse was given to me, and he could not have been more perfect. Sometimes you get lucky, just be careful and be a little skeptical.

The Pre-Purchase Exam

Let's assume that everything had gone well up to this point. The horse you are looking at seems perfect in every way and the agreed on price is fair. The next thing to consider is whether you want to have a pre-purchase exam done on the horse. In most cases, I would recommend having at least a basic exam done. A
good vet can spot problems that even an experienced horseman can miss, and you are better off knowing about an issue now than after you have time, money, and emotions invested in your new horse. Be aware that you will be expected to put a deposit on the horse to secure your right as a buyer before scheduling an exam.

The real question usually becomes how much to do during a pre-purchase. A pre-purchase can cost a few hundred, or add up to well over one thousand dollars depending on how thorough you want to be and how many radiographs you want taken. Obviously, if you are paying more for the horse, you will want to do more during the pre-purchase. Likewise, if you will be asking a lot from the horse in performance, you will want to spend more on the pre-purchase to be assured there are no underlying issues in the horse’s joints and bone structure.

Find a vet that you know and trust personally, or that comes with excellent recommendations. I usually trust my vet’s opinion for what should be done during a pre-purchase. Talk to the vet and tell them what your plans are for the horse. They can recommend how extensive the exam should be. When I have a vet out to do a pre-purchase on a potential new horse that is going to be used for only light riding, we will typically start with a physical exam and a soundness evaluation. In a soundness evaluation, the vet will ask to see the horse moving at the walk, trot, and canter on the lunge line and sometimes under saddle as well. Then they will perform flexion tests, where each leg is held up and a particular joint is flexed to its max and held for about a minute. Then the horse’s leg is put down and the horse is trotted forward in a straight line. If a horse trots off sore after a joint has been flexed, that signals a potential issue in that joint. To proceed with the exam, the vet will then take radiographs of that joint to look for the problem.

Go with what makes you feel comfortable and with what your vet recommends for you and your potential new horse. Do keep in mind that vets do not “pass or fail” horses during the exam. The vet will tell you what he finds and his opinion of what it could mean down the road, but he is not going to give you a pass or fail, even though those terms are commonly used. It is ultimately up to you as the buyer to decide whether any issue discovered is a deal breaker or if you are willing to live with it. Almost every horse will have something come up in a pre-purchase, trust your vet’s opinion but use common sense and think for yourself.

Trials

Sometimes a buyer will take a horse on trial for a period of several days to a week (or longer if the seller is very generous). While a trial can be peace of mind for the buyer that their new horse is truly the right match, there are cons to doing a trial that apply to both buyer and seller. Many sellers don’t like sending a horse out on trial and the reason is pretty obvious – everyone rides and handles horses differently, and a horse’s training can be seriously compromised if he is mishandled. This is especially true of young horses. A horse can also be injured during the trial period, and while there should be a contract that states to what extent the buyer is liable, no one really wants to deal with that situation. Also,
horses can be more on edge and act differently when they are moved to a new place. The whole process of moving and changing environments is very stressful for a horse, and it may take longer than the trial period for a horse to settle into a different home and start behaving normally again.

If, as a buyer, you do wish to have a trial on a horse, ask the seller if they are willing to do it and for how long. Just be understanding of the seller’s position here, and also remember that they are trying to determine how serious you are as a buyer, because if their horse does come back after a trial that was just time they were unable to show the horse to other potential buyers. If you do end up taking a horse on trial, first make sure you have a safe place to keep the horse, preferably separate from other horses so they are not as likely to be injured. Also, take a close look at the contract so you know exactly what you are liable for. As a seller, when I allow a horse out on trial, I require the full purchase price up front, and the contract states that I retain the purchase price if the horse is injured or, heaven forbid, killed during the trial. Trial contracts vary a lot, so make sure you know what you are signing.

**Sales Contract**

Sales contracts will vary in content and length. If you do a trial, you may have separate contracts for the trial and the sale, or the trial may be written in as essentially a clause in the sales contract. Typically the seller will write up the contract, and most sales contracts do state, to some extent, that the seller is not warranting the health, behavior, or temperament of the horse. This means that once you have bought the horse, he’s yours, so do your due diligence beforehand. If the seller does not provide a sales contract, I would recommend asking them to sign at least a simple bill of sale, so that you have some proof of your legal purchase and a receipt if you are paying cash. Method of payment will depend on the seller and how trusting they are, but most sellers will not accept a personal check for the obvious reason, there is no guarantee the funds are actually there. Expect to pay for your new horse with either cash or a certified check.
Pitfalls of the Sale

I want to talk about a few common areas where sellers could possibly be dishonest, so you know what to look out for.

Number one is drugging the horse, a seller can give the horse a sedative to make him easier to ride and handle. A seller can also give a horse a drug in an attempt to hide a subtle lameness. If you are concerned the horse you are looking at may be drugged, asked to ride or handle the horse again right before your pre-purchase exam and then ask your vet to perform a drug test. Do not accuse the seller of doing this without proof though. A horse’s temperament can change drastically one day to the next for a variety of factors. Just because he was calmer last time you rode him, or before you brought him home does not mean he was drugged.

Number two is fudging the age of the horse. A seller may claim that the horse is younger than he really is to increase the horse’s value and make him an easier sale. Again, if this is a concern, ask your vet to take a look at his teeth and verify his age.

Number three is exaggerating the horses experience and training level. I know some horses that are advertised as being “great on trails,” when in reality, they have only done a few 5-minute hacks around the pasture. Likewise, there are horses that are advertised with experience in the hunt field, which actually means they were pulled off the trailer at the beginning of the hunt, a few pictures were taken with the hounds, and then the horse was loaded back in the trailer and taken home. This can apply to any type of riding experience, so ask smart questions of the seller about exactly what the horse’s experience is and take what they say with a grain of salt.

Most sellers are honest, but the few who are not can give everyone a bad rap.
What’s Next? Bringing Your New Horse Home

Before you actually purchase a horse, you should have already decided if you are keeping the horse on your own property or boarding him somewhere. If you are boarding, you need to have the barn picked out and make sure they have room available.

If there is any question about the horse’s health or suspicion that he may have been exposed to unhealthy horses, such as in an auction situation, a quarantine period is highly recommended to protect other horses at that barn. The barn manager may have a quarantine area, or in the case you did buy from an auction or similar situation, they may ask that you take the horse to a quarantine facility first. A typical quarantine period is 10-14 days.

When you are talking to the seller, find out what the horse is currently eating, both hay and grain, and try to find the same or similar feed to use for a short time, as the horse is switched over to what you or your new barn will be feeding. Switching feeds slowly will reduce the chances of your horse having any sort of digestive upset.

After quarantine, or if there were no concerns in the first place, it is time to introduce your horse into his new routine. This will mean introducing him to new horses, which will be done at your barn manager’s discretion. Be aware that a small amount of fighting and jostling for position is normal when putting unfamiliar horses together. The more submissive your horse is in nature, the easier this process will be.

A few other things to think about with your new horse - are there any vaccinations you want your horse to have that he does not already?

Is he at a healthy weight or do you need to adjust his ration to get him to a more ideal body condition?

If you are unsure of any of these questions, consult your barn manager or vet.

This is also the fun time where you get to go shopping for your new horse to by equipment that you don’t have yet or that you need in a different size.

You want to keep a close watch on your new horse the first few weeks after moving him. Moving is stressful for horses, so watch for signs of digestive upset and other illness. Also be alert when working with and riding your horse, some horses may be more excitable or their behavior more erratic right after a move.
What You Need to Learn

Even if you are boarding your horse, as his owner, you are ultimately responsible for his care. Barn managers and experienced horse people have many different opinions as to the best way to care for a horse. Knowledgeable horse people will argue about the amount of stall time to turnout, blanketing, feeding strategies, and everything in between. I am of the school of thought of keeping horses in as natural of a way as is possible, with lots of time outside and feeding plenty of forage – grass and hay. But I recommend that you do your own research and draw your own conclusions as to the best care for your horse.

You also want to know basic first aid and being able to spot a problem with your horse. Learn how to spot the signs of colic or laminitis, and learn the basic treatment for a cut or a swollen leg. There are many excellent books on horse first aid, or you could ask your vet to teach you the basics.

The principles of training are also very important to learn. Now that you are a horse owner, you will realize quickly that you really are training a horse every time you work with them. Some horses are very tolerant of novice mistakes, others will learn how to take advantage in areas you are unconfident. There are many styles of training out there, I recommend exploring many of them and choose a method or school of thought that feels right for you. If you keep your horse at a public boarding barn, you may encounter other well-intentioned horse owners that try to give you advice on problems, whether they are medical problems or training or behavior issues. By knowing the basics you can decide for yourself if they are giving you helpful info or if you need to say thank you but find another way.

You can explore different methods of training and learn about theories of horse care by visiting a horse expo, reading books, watching videos, or visiting local trainers to watch them work. You can also start by visiting my blog, at www.crktrainingblog.com. I post free videos of training, riding, and horse care tips here every week.

Enjoy both the rewards and the challenges of horse ownership. You will discover there is always something new to learn, but if you plan ahead and know what you want in a horse and then take your time to find the right one, you will have many good times with your new equine friend.
Thanks for taking the time to read this eBook. I sincerely hope it has helped you on your journey to finding the right horse. I would love to hear your feedback about the book and answer any questions you may have. My email address is crktrainingvideos@gmail.com. I look forward to hearing from you!

Callie

Disclaimer: Working with and riding horses is dangerous. Make sure you know the risks and how to stay safe. Riding new horses that you don’t know can increase the risks, so as mentioned before, I recommend that you consult with a trainer or experienced friend if you are new to horses. Also, the stories and information given here comes from my personal experience buying and selling horses. I realize that opinions will vary on many things, such as trials, price negotiation, and veterinary exams. Buyer beware!