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Things to Look for When Selecting a Horse and Key Questions to Ask!

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FACT SHEET

Department of Animal Science, University of Connecticut

Effective Horse Management - Fourth in the Horse Selection Series

Things to look for when selecting a horse and key questions to ask!

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Horse ownership is an exciting prospect! You are now at the point where you know that you have the means to support your horse, you have the knowledge on how to care for the horse, and you are able to ride. Now you want to own your own horse that will meet your riding goals and needs.

When purchasing a horse you should always try to have a veterinarian do an exam or be with you especially if you are a novice owner. The veterinarian will be there working for you – not for the seller. Consider additional tests like x-rays to be performed by the veterinarian. Even if you trust and love the person selling you a horse – a pre-purchase veterinarian exam is still a smart idea. When purchasing a horse, there are two types of considerations regarding the horse: behavioral traits and conformation. Behavioral traits have to do with the overall attitude of the horse while conformation concerns the way he is put together. Ideas for “screening” your new horse are below, listed under these categories.

Some aspects to consider:

Behavioral Traits

Look for signs of behavioral problems in the horse’s stall such as chewing, cracked/broken walls, “tracks” worn in the floor, paint scraped off the bars, grain or half chewed hay in bedding, and/or diarrhea.

1. Does this horse have a cribbing or wind sucking problem? If so, how is it currently managed?
2. Does this horse kick in the stall, and if so when and why?
3. Does this horse stall walk, paw or weave?

4. Does this horse grind his teeth on the bars?
5. Can the horse easily be haltered in the stall?

Consider the horse's outdoor living space (look for isolation while others are grouped, look for signs of chewing or pushing on fences if horse is kept alone, look for discrepancies between equipment in or size of paddock) and ask the following questions:

1. Why is this horse isolated from the herd? Is he aggressive or very passive?
2. Does the horse like to chew or push on his fence?
3. Why does this horse not have a hay feeder (for example) and all others do – does this mean he climbs in it?
4. Why is this horse in a really small paddock – does he jump out if given enough room to run?

Take in the horse's general appearance - is he relaxed, does he stand square? Look for obvious disfigurements, check for balance and look for overdevelopment of one side. Does sudden movement or sound distract him? Look for a horse that is bright, alert and responsive. Ask the following questions:

1. Why does this horse look so tense? Does he have any health problems that are making him uncomfortable?
2. Does this horse bite or kick? How is this horse around equine professionals like the vet or farrier? How is this horse around young children?
3. Has this horse ever been injured and if so what was his treatment plan? Was the plan followed? Was a veterinarian called and did he revisit? Has this injury resulted in any chronic problems?
4. How "spooky" is this horse? Is there any sound or visual cue that really makes him scared? Has he been out on the trail? What do you know about his behavior in "active" or new situations?

Observe the horse's movement and attitude under saddle – Watch the horse for attentiveness – is he relaxed or tense? Watch for head tossing which could indicate resistance or mouth problems. Look for signs of stiffness as mentioned earlier. At the lope or canter look for smooth rhythm and make certain he/she takes the correct lead in both directions easily. Refusal to take a lead could mean he/she is sore. After 5-10 minutes of cantering or loping – listen to breathing – which should be relaxed, regular and in time with his striding. When he/she is stopped, notice recovery time – which should not be longer than time spent cantering.

1. In general does the horse enjoy going to work? Does he willingly leave the barn area?
2. Do you feel this horse has a soft or hard mouth? What bit are you using right now? What bit is this horse SHOWN in? What training aids are being used on this horse? Has this horse been trained with or shown in spurs? Do you use a crop or whip on this horse?
3. What lead does this animal favor and what do you do to assist him in taking and/or keeping his more difficult lead? Does he move with more collection and balance in one direction as compared to the other?
4. How often does this animal get worked and for what general duration? In what discipline(s) does this animal work? How quickly do you feel this horse recovers after vigorous work? Have you noticed any breathing difficulties?
5. Has this horse been worked out of the arena? Has it been worked up and down hills? Does it exhibit any weaknesses when being worked on difficult terrain?

Conformation

Examine the horse's head – Check eyes, slowly pass a hand by each eye and look for blinking response (don't touch whiskers or create a breeze). Look for a bluish film covering the eye. Look at teeth – check for misalignment. Sniff the horse's breath for foul odor which could be an indication of infection or illness. Look at the tongue for signs of past damage. Check underside of jaws looking to see that glands on each side are not swollen or sensitive and check for strong and regular pulse.

1. Does this horse have any blindness or cataract issues? How is his night vision? Does he have moon blindness? Is there a discharge from his/her eye?
2. Has the vet mentioned any problems with regard to this horse's teeth?
3. Does the horse have bit damage? Do the upper and lower teeth meet squarely?
4. Has this horse been checked for strangles – his glands seem swollen?
5. Does the horse have a discharge from the nostrils?

Examine the horse's neck – Move fingers down neck feeling rings of trachea – they should feel evenly spaced. At mid neck – press in on jugular vein – obstructing blood flow for a moment, see if they fill equally on both sides. Ideally, the neck should be long and flow smoothly into the shoulder. The underside of the neck should not be more developed than the topline of the neck.

1. If you feel that the rings are uneven, may this horse have had a kick or rope injury?
2. Are you aware of any injury to this horse's neck in general?

Examine the horse's legs – look for joints that do not point in the same direction. Feel for the digital pulse leading into the hoof – on both sides – see that it is even. Look for any bony growth near a joint. Look for hard bumps or soft lumps, they may not be damaging, but you should inquire as to their origin.

1. Does this horse have any trouble with lameness? How often have you seen this horse lame? How much work does it take to cause this horse discomfort?
2. Has this horse been foundered? If so when and what does your vet/farrier say about the prognosis with regard to soundness?
3. Has this horse been nerved, or do you know of any navicular problems with this animal.
4. Are any of the bumps/lumps new? What do you feel caused them? Has a veterinarian checked them?
5. Does this horse have corrective shoes and if so, why? How is this horse's behavior for the farrier?
6. Does the horse have hooves that are different sizes or angles? Does the horse have rings around the hoof wall? Are they irregular (indicative of a previous episode of founder or interruption in hoof growth)? Are they even (indicative of a high nutrition plane)
7. Does the horse have small scars on inside of pastern immediately below the sesamoids? (indicative of interference or other problems)

Examine the horse's topline – Starting at withers – run your hand firmly down back all the way to tail and feel for heat. Look for the horse to dip slightly from pressure. Look for sign of anger or discomfort like ear pinning, flinching or arching. Watch the horse breathe in and out – make certain breathing is regular. If it is

irregular there may be an obstruction or chronic respiratory problem. It is desirable for the horse to have a short back, good coupling and long croup.

1. Does this horse have a sore back? Does this happen often and what do you believe causes this?
2. Does this horse have heaves or any other respiratory problem, allergies or bronchitis?
3. Evaluate the angle of the shoulder (should be 45-50°)

Observe the horse's movement in hand – Watch horse being led – watch for coordination and willingness. Incoordination may be a sign of neurological problem. While walking the horse in a circle, push the horse's hip outward. A normal horse should regain balance quickly. While at a walk – look at the foot fall pattern. Check for paddling and winging which can cause interference. Watch horse at the jog on hard level ground moving both in a straight line and tight circle. Look for head nodding or hip dropping which can indicate pain. Listen to rhythm of the gait – it should be a 1-2 tempo at a trot. Next closely watch head, look for signs of nodding or for the head being held very high throughout the stride. Next watch hip, while jogging if the hip pops up one limb may not be supporting the horse properly. Sinking and rising of the hip could indicate a problem with ligaments, tendons and muscles, and in general, a rear quarter lameness. Next watch the feet and legs for equal striding in both distance and flight pattern and equal time on the ground. Be aware that horses which are sore in both feet may move equally, but with a short, stilty, trappy stride. If anything has made you wary - ask the handler to work the horse on uneven ground (including up and down hill) or soft grass – as some problems will become more evident under these conditions.

1. How coordinated do you feel this horse is? How much in hand training has this horse had? If it lacks coordination, has this horse been checked for EPM or any other neurological condition?
2. Does this horse interfere – if so at what gait(s) is it most prevalent? Does this horse have trouble stepping on itself and pulling shoes off?
3. Has this horse exhibited lameness? If so in which leg, and what caused this condition? Request to be informed of any leg injuries this horse has received in the past few years.

Review Health Records – Review the horse's deworming and vaccination records. Ask if health records are kept on the horse and if yes, ask to see them.

1. Does the horse have a negative Coggins test? (to determine if the horse has equine infectious anemia, if positive the horse must be quarantined or euthanized)
2. Has it been vaccinated for West Nile Virus?
3. Has it ever had a reaction to a vaccination?
4. When was this horse's last dental exam? How old is this horse and does he have chronic dental issues?
- 5.

By looking at your prospective horse objectively and asking these questions, you have a better chance of making the right decision in purchasing a horse. Be sure to ask as many questions as you can. It is best to enlist the aid of a trained professional if you do not have previous experience in purchasing horses.

References

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