

## **Matching People and Horse; Common Sense for Buyers and Sellers**

**Dr. Walter Henslee, Rancho Del Lago, McDade, TX**

**(Based on our experience buying and selling dozens of horses in a dozen states and 2 foreign countries over the past decade)**

Horses are like people. They aren't perfect. They all have issues. Horses for sale will almost certainly have some issues, or they probably wouldn't be for sale! The question is whether the issues of the horse you are considering, are something you can live with, or something that will be a train wreck for you. The trick is to sort out the train wrecks from the horse that will meet your needs and fits the skill level of your handlers and riders. The horse you want to buy is the last horse anyone wants to sell: sound, sane, brave, affectionate, beautiful, well trained, great mover, impressive pedigree and available at a bargain price, of course. But, from time to time, honest people must sell, or choose to sell, good horses at reasonable prices. Someone is always retiring, getting a divorce, has developed a health issue, the only rider in the family just went off to college, needs money for something else, or just got bigger than they want to be. You probably won't find "fantastic" at a fire sale price, unless the seller doesn't know what they have, or is really in a bind to move quickly. Beware the horse at an apparent fire sale price, unless you know with whom you are dealing. It's far more likely that there are some serious problems. That's because the fantastic horse at a fire sale price usually never makes it to the open market. It went to a friend or someone the seller knew and trusted, because finding the right home was more important to the seller than getting the highest price.

With work and patience, you can find a good horse, and perhaps one with the potential to be a great horse, at a bargain price. We found our first National Grand Champion at a low price 17 years ago. A large breeder of Peruvian horses was getting a divorce. The wife wanted money, not horses. The husband wanted the best of the breeding stock. So some excellent geldings were going at bargain prices. His good friend was also our good friend and he steered us to a fabulous 4 year old with a great pedigree. He had only been shown once at halter and was just started under saddle. One year later, including professional training and lessons for us, this horse was National Grand Champion, Performance Gelding of the Year, and Performance Horse of the Year. The purchase price was \$4000, at that time what you would pay for a pretty average horse in that breed. We also purchased our senior Andalusian stallion as a foal at a very reasonable price because the breeder was cleaning house on all her boys to bring in an outside new stallion. She wasn't keeping any colts because they were all very closely related to her mares. We purchased 3 half brothers, resold 2 of them at enough of a profit to recover our investment for all 3, and kept the one that we liked best overall. Now 13, he turned out to be one of those rare "do everything" horses: multi Champion at halter and under saddle; sire of multiple National Champions; lesson horse; demo horse; trick horse. The point of these two stories is that, to find good, with the potential to be great, at a bargain price, requires patience, luck and guidance, especially if you are an inexperienced buyer. There is no substitute for lots of looking and comparing. This will allow you to "know it when finally you see it".

Purchasing a horse is a big commitment. You can't easily disengage if you make a mistake. However, it can lead to one of the most rewarding experiences in life. People in the business for the long term strive to make good matches of people and horses because that leads to referrals and repeat business. People ask us all the time, "How can you bear to sell your babies?" I tell them, "If you work on making good matches, it is a source of joy and new friendships. Many of our best friends today are people we met because they were searching for a horse. We receive e mails, photos or video from somebody every few weeks of our foals growing up. And there is nothing more rewarding than sitting next to a new owner at a show with tears streaming down his or her face, cheering madly, as their horse wins the blue ribbon. And best of all, we have the pleasure without having to pay the entry fee for the class!

Beginning young riders represent a particular challenge. If you purchase a very quiet “bomb proof” horse, the youngster may rapidly out-grow it. On the other hand, purchasing one significantly above the child’s skill level may frighten them and make the whole equestrian experience regrettable. Parents often buy their children a horse barely above dead because they want one that’s safe. But 6 months to a year later, the child knows how to ride and has now bonded to this animal, but it just can’t or won’t do anything. The horse may be in decline a few years later, just when the youngster’s skills are peaking. We experienced some of this with our first 2 horses. Observers and judges we didn’t even know would come up to us at our first 4-H shows and say, “You know, your daughter has a lot of potential. But she just isn’t on enough horse.” At first, we thought they just wanted us to spend money with them. But when people with no financial axe to grind told us that, we made the painful decision to sell and upgrade, eventually finding our way from back yard quarter horses to Andalusians. This is a tough part of the landscape in any competitive field, whether it be dressage, barrel racing, or jumping. Sometimes the “outgrown horse” can stay around as a horse for the parents or grandchildren, or a broodmare. I always advise people to consider resale potential and alternative uses when they purchase, even if today they think they will own this horse for life.

The video camera is indispensable for buying and selling. It gives you the ability to compare horses and watch them move in slow motion. For breeding stock, I encourage people to ask for video of the natural, untrained movement of the horse as a youngster if this is available. This gives you the best indication of what’s in the genes; not what the horse has been trained to do. Of course, you can’t train great into a horse that has no natural talent. We like to show video of a horse we are considering to other breeders and trainers we trust, to get their opinions. I also like to get and give as much information as possible on the parents, grandparents, and siblings. The seller should include video and pictures of these when available. First saddles, bravery tests (how does the horse react to something it’s never seen before?), trailer loading are also important. I am amazed at how many transactions take place without the purchaser asking basic questions like, “Does this horse load?” How did it react to the first trip away from home, the first show or trail ride? Does this horse have any vices? The seller is not obligated to tell you everything wrong with the horse they are selling. However, most people will not tell a bald faced lie or misrepresent, if you simply ask. And if they do misrepresent, you may be able to tell by their affect or body language. If you can get to the real reason they are selling this horse, you can make a more informed decision. A friend recently purchased an excellent gelding that was sold at a bargain because the owner couldn’t handle him as a stallion and got disgusted when his personality didn’t change overnight after he was gelded. She apparently didn’t realize that it takes several months for the hormones to readjust. A few months later the gelding was suitable for a child or novice with a little talent. Of course, gelding a stallion does not always produce this change in temperament, but it certainly did in this case and that buyer got a great horse at a bargain price.

One other aspect of assessing your prospective new horse is a comprehensive vet check. Regardless of the monetary value of the horse, you should consider that this equine may well become your friend and extended family member. Purchasing a horse with an unsoundness, history of colic, cardiac or respiratory problems may pose life-long management problems and be emotionally and financially draining. The vet should be able to tell you whether there are any problems or conformational flaws which might prevent the horse from performing well for your intended purpose. It is important to realize that no horse is perfect. Most vets will tell you that if they look hard enough, they can always find something. Years ago, our daughter fell in love with a beautiful young mare who had a large side-bone, identified by x-ray at the pre-purchase exam. Kim wanted to jump the horse. The vet informed us that if the mare broke off a piece of the side-bone at a jump she could become completely incapacitated. He felt that this was not an appropriate discipline for this mare. We passed on the mare. Another horse we were about to purchase was found to have a windpuff at vet check. The vet explained that this was a blemish only, and didn’t anticipate that it would impact the horse’s soundness. We made the decision to purchase that one. Remember the first paragraph of this paper. The question is whether any conformational or health issue the vet finds is something that will materially affect the functionality of the horse for your intended use. While it doesn’t show everything, it one more piece of data to get before writing the check. Of course visiting the horse and riding it over a period of weeks or months, seeing it in a variety of circumstances is the

best way to evaluate a prospect. But that just isn't always possible. If you show up and the horse is saddled and sweaty, you have no idea what happened before you got there. Is the horse a hard catch? Is it difficult to tack? Does it have to be worn out before you can safely mount?

Our own first shopping experiences nearly 20 years ago were near disasters. Although I grew up around horses, I knew nothing about shopping for one or taking care of a horse for that matter. My cowboy brother-in-law and my horse trader Dad had done all that. I just rode like a wild Indian through the woods and creeks of south Dallas County, the stomping grounds of the legendary quarter horse, Steel Dust. In the early 90's, we were looking for a first horse for our horse crazy 11 year old daughter and two of our sons. At one barn, we tried an Arabian in a paddock. One side of the paddock was attached to the stable and tack room. Unfortunately, the sellers left the tack room door open and the Arabian mare decided to run through it with our son on board, peeling him off at the door. Next, we answered an ad in the Houston paper that said, "Gentle saddlebred mare; anybody can ride". Our first mistake was to put our daughter on a strange horse before the trainer or owner rode her. The second mistake was trying out this unknown horse on the shoulder of a road, rather than in a confined arena. Things were fine going away from the barn but the horse ran off with her coming back. Things really went out of control when the horse unsuccessfully attempted to jump between a parked truck and the attached trailer and launched our daughter 30 feet into the front yard of the horrified spectators. She escaped with minor cuts and bruises, as did the horse. In the flurry of apologies and explanations, it came out that, "We didn't run the ad; the horse belongs to my boss and we are trying to help them sell it. They are selling it because she is afraid of the horse." I'm thinking, "You people are idiots and so are we!" Neither of our children were novice riders at the time. They had been on lots of horses but we just didn't see these wrecks coming before they happened. We know better today. At lunch, my wife, said, "Maybe this isn't such a good idea." Our entire future as horse owners hung in the balance because of these stupid and avoidable mistakes. The only thing that kept us from abandoning ship was a gutsy passionate 11 year old who said "I have to get on another horse. Today!" Sure enough, we purchased a quarter horse mare later that same day. This time, however, the seller rode her first and in a confined paddock. She also agreed to take her back in a couple of days if we got her home and things didn't work out. She turned out to be just fine, except for one serious vice. She would rocket out the back of the trailer when you unloaded her. But that's another story and another lesson learned the hard way.

As Paul Harvey would say, "The rest of the story..." is that buying a horse that day changed our lives forever. We can't imagine a life without horses. Two of our children became avid riders. We had not planned to show, but a short 3 years later our daughter garnered 31 first place ribbons and several regional and national championships on the Peruvian gelding I discussed above. In 1996, she rode him in the musical exercise class at the national show, sitting backwards on the horse. Monte Lindo and Kim were featured in over 30 magazine and newspaper articles, nationwide. Our son, Chris, became a gifted rider, trainer, and exhibitor. He spent a summer on 3 ranches in South America and another in Mexico, learned Spanish, spent a week with John Lyons and has performed at several horse shows and expos. He opened the evening performance of the Texas Equestrian Trail Riders Expo riding our Andalusian stallion, Magico, at a full gallop, freestyle, carrying an American flag and no tack of any kind on the horse. Another son, Bryan, is a fantastic photographer and helped us develop our web site. His daughter now rides with him. Judy became our resident vet and is totally immersed in nutrition, breeding, foaling, imprinting and so many other subjects. I have been able to relive my childhood. We have also worked with several handicapped riders. A dwarf, whose goal was to ride without being led. That was success for her. A friend had a blind child, who took lessons for months at our place. He could only feel a sense of speed and freedom on a horse, because he couldn't run or ride a bike. One man, who purchased a half Andalusian, has a paralyzed leg. He recently told me, "The only time I don't feel handicapped is on the back of a horse. Every day with horses is a gift." We are now good friends and his attitude inspires me when I have a bad day.

One last thing. Sometimes all this analytical stuff just goes right out the window because, "magic happens." If I think the match is completely wrong, I will point out the obvious. But on a few rare occasions, I have seen horses and buyers instantly bond. So when visitors come, I show them

everything for sale. And, I am not surprised when someone comes to look at a particular horse and buys one that is nothing like the one they came to see. Our first mare literally, chose us. The breeder and seller said, “This is NOT what you said you wanted. You said, seasoned trail horse. This is a show filly with multiple National Champions in her pedigree; not even under saddle and twice your price range!” We bought her anyway and never looked back. She was, perhaps, the most noble horse we have ever owned. We could never have foreseen any of this when we purchased that first horse. So, regardless of your horse goals, big or small, it is always a work in progress and every other horse person you meet has something to teach you. So, I tell people, “Visit breeders and trainers, even if they don’t have the right horse for you. You’ll leave with a much better idea of what you’re looking for and how to spot that diamond in the rough. And if they don’t have your dream horse, they may know someone who does.

**Why Do You Suppose 44 Shoppers Purchased 60 Horses  
From Rancho Del Lago in the Past 5 Years?**

***Because They Found What They Wanted – Great Horses at Fair Prices!  
Buyers were from TX, CA, AZ, OK, NJ, CT, MI, WI, TN, AL, FL, CO, MT, WA & the Netherlands.***

**Here's What a Few of Them Had to Say...**

“If we ever purchase another horse, it will be from Rancho Del Lago.” *Robert and Glenda from Central Tx*

“Koko and I are totally partners. Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to have her in my life. Your hospitality was heartwarming, as was your true and genuine love for your horses and your farm. It does the heart good to know that the forever horse I found has come from such a loving environment.” *Pat from Colorado*

“Thanks you so much for those two dream horses. I am over the moon.” *Jenny from Holland*

“Congrats on your wonderful herd. I know that angels sent me to the right source for horses. The consistent beauty your horses exhibit is evident.” *Sian from Washington*

“Our horses are perfect for us. Rancho Del Lago not only breeds beautiful and well trained horses, but the Henslees have such integrity and have been so helpful and hospitable that we consider them good friends.”  
*Barry and Gail from Houston*

“I came to Rancho Del Lago to photograph their horses. I had no intention of buying one. But this mare, heavy with foal, stood in the morning light like a vision or a dream. Later I did dream of her, and then I knew, she was supposed to be mine.” *Candace from Texas*

“Relampago made it here tonight and he is absolutely stunning, beautiful, wonderful, marvelous! He is amazing!! I could not be happier. He came out of the trailer nice and quiet and is settling in.” *Eddie from Montana; P.S. a month later* “Bob thinks he is going to be the best horse I have ever owned. We are both just thrilled with him. Thanks for the wonderful training that we can tell he had. It is nice to know there are still some honest “horse people” out there!”

“I love this horse more than any horse I have ever owned. He is a true gift of God. I cannot thank you enough for the extraordinary opportunity of being part of this animals life.” *Sheri from Houston.*