

## HOW-TO

# Buy Your Dream Horse

Story and photos by Wendye Gardiner

## MARKETING YOUR HORSE: PART III

**B**uying a horse can be an extremely fun and yet incredibly daunting experience. There are of course the famed “horse traders” who are dishonest, and there are also very honest horse traders, sellers, and trainers. There are backyard owners who may or may not know the quality of their horse so you can find a diamond in the rough, or just find something very rough. People who hide the horse’s true temperament through dishonest means, and people who are merely “too honest” making the horse sound horrible even if it is, in fact, wonderful. Finding the right horse can be hard, and dealing with that horse’s humans can be even harder. It helps tremendously to have a horsey friend who can accompany you, or even better a trainer or mentor who has experience with these things, but if they are not available for whatever reason, this guide should help give you some insight into what to watch for, what to look for, what questions to ask, and how to make your horse search as smooth and fun as possible so that you can find your lifetime friend!

### WHERE TO BEGIN

Before you start your search you should sit down and make a list of what you want in a horse. Things you’d like but can live without, and things you can’t stand in a horse. Where will your horse live and in what sort of stall/pasture situation? Will he have friends? Are your feeding and turnout options flexible? Do you need a horse who can go barefoot? How often will you ride? Do you mind longeing before riding? Can you handle a spooky horse? Do you plan to show? What disciplines will you be doing? Do you need a horse who is versatile or specialized? What level do you plan to show to? Want to wear the roses at Nationals or just play at the local schooling shows? If you endurance ride, at what level do you plan to compete? An FEI-caliber horse will have much different criteria than a twice a year

This is third installment in a new series of “how-to” features. For all of the articles in the previous series go to [www.arabianhorseworld.com](http://www.arabianhorseworld.com).

25-miler. Any horse can do dressage but if you want to go high in the levels you will need to be a bit more picky. If buying for a kid, you are going to want an older horse who has actually been places, shown, trail ridden, hauled, ridden in traffic and crowds, etc. — don’t buy a young horse so that they’ll grow up together! Try to stay away from demanding too specific things like color, and keep an open mind on bloodlines as much as possible. If you have to have a pure Polish black purebred mare over 15.3 hands, who is under 8 years old, has been shown extensively, and is perfectly sound and under \$5,000 — you will be looking a very long time! Stay realistic and open-minded while still being picky enough that you will not buy the first horse you see and regret your decision three months later when it turns out that you need a lazy calm dude who is happy to hang out in the pasture and be ridden once a month, but got a hyper, overly dramatic thinker who wants to work four hours a day every day.

### THE SEARCH

There are a lot of Internet websites that will list horses for sale. Watch out for scams — if a horse and its price look too good to be true, it probably is. That said, there can be “diamonds in the rough” out there to be found, but you might have to weed through a lot of frogs to find your handsome prince. Figure out your search criteria, using a slightly wider range than your ideal, and remember that backyard owners might have great horses but not take great pictures. Keep an

open mind and make contact with the sellers by email and phone if possible to ask your list of questions to weed out the “definitely nots” from the “maybes” trying not to get your hopes up with “must-haves.”

A good place to start is with a reputable trainer who might have several horses for sale that fit the general style of horse you are looking for. Check out trainers’ websites for listings of horses and if there are a couple that catch your eye, give them a call. Tell them up front your price limit, intended use of the horse, and your riding ability. Most trainers will be able to guide you in the right direction if they have a horse who will fit your criteria.

A trend that has developed over the past couple of years is the online auction. Buyer beware, as you are likely buying a horse sight unseen off nothing but a video. If you choose to do it, I strongly recommend calling and talking to the seller, finding out the horse’s history, soundness, maintenance issues, and rideability/temperament to try to make the best match possible. If you are an experienced rider who can handle a wide variety of horses, with an experienced eye that can see between the lines to the bones of the horse’s potential within the video, *and* can afford to take a gamble (because that’s really what it is) then an auction can be a fantastic way to get a great buy. But if you are a one-horse owner who wants to keep your horse forever, this is not the best place to search. Unless a horse is in a location close to where you live so that you can actually go out and see it in person and talk with its owner/trainer beforehand, then buying at auction can be just like a normal purchase, without a vet check.

## MAKING CONTACT

When you first send an email or make a call to a seller, be it a trainer or a person off an ad, tell them exactly which horse you are calling about and find out whether he is still available. Don’t overwhelm them with the details on the first contact; just feel them out a bit. This is to make sure they are a real person selling a real horse, and you can also feel out how willingly they will be giving you information about the horse, or if they will be more of a pulling-teeth sort of seller. Ideally you get to deal with a forthcoming, honest seller who wants to make the best match for the horse, and is not just trying to move numbers and make money. You can feel this out a bit just by a simple conversation. You can also tell a person who knows horses from one who doesn’t by their terminology (I saw a horse who was at least “15.7” one time), which can help prepare you for the condition of the horse and the farm if you do decide to make a visit.



After your initial contact, but before making an appointment to go see the horse, I suggest asking all the questions that will help you determine if this horse will be one you can’t stand or will love. If he is somewhere in the middle you will probably want to go see him anyway, as what his owner feels and what you feel can be totally different. But a clubfoot isn’t going to change, nor is a stubborn personality going to become extremely willing and pliable overnight. Forthcoming sellers will want to know as much about you as possible to figure out if the horse will be a good fit for you, and if not, they might have another recommendation. Others might want to know all about what you want so they can tell you that their horse is perfect, and will tailor their description to what you want to hear. This is hard to figure out sometimes, and the only way to find out is by making a visit, but you never know, maybe he *is* the one.

## THE VISIT

After you have decided that this horse is worth checking out, make an appointment with the seller to go see him. You might ask that they leave the horse in his stall so that you can see him in his natural environment and how he responds to being caught. A good practice is to arrive a few minutes early, so if there is any shady business going on, you would be able to catch it. If you are running late, however, be courteous and call. They may be waiting on just you to arrive and could do other things while waiting. Ideally the horse is in his stall and hasn’t been touched that day, but you might ask them when was the

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last time the horse was ridden, had he done anything before you arrived, such as been longed or been turned out, and make sure afterwards, that you see his legs without wraps on. Make friends with the horse and see how he reacts to you. Is he interested in you or not? Grumpy or of a naturally positive nature? Does he seem especially bonded with his handler or just passive and accepting? Pick up his feet — this will tell you how much handling he has had, and to some extent, his personality. Touch him all over, see if he has any wounds or sore spots. Ask about his health history and records. Any questions you can think of, ask — if the sellers are offended, they are hiding something. Remember, the goal is to find your long-term best friend, you have a lot of things to find out in a short period of time in order to find out if you will be able to live with this horse for years to come.

## THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR AND TAKE NOTE

1. Are the horse's eyes droopy? Is he completely calm and nonreactive to absolutely anything? It is possible he might be drugged to make him appear different than normal. It's also possible that this is just him. If you are in doubt and love the horse, ask for a blood test when you do the pre-purchase exam and see if he has any sedative in his system.

2. Is the seller especially pushy, and/or making sure you know there are multiple buyers on the hook and you need to make your decision today? Be wary. Ask to make a second visit. Ask if you can drop by and see the horse any time. Don't get your adrenaline up and feel as if you have to have this horse before someone else buys him — if it's meant to be it will

happen. A pushy seller may just be a pushy person in general, or they may be hiding something.

3. Is the seller strongly against a vet check and encouraging you to skip it? Red flag — even if you didn't plan to do one, you might want to rethink that.

Most horse people are honest people and care about the horse's well-being and future happiness in a new home, but there are always some bad apples. Be thorough, ask questions, and don't get too attached too early!

## THE FIRST RIDE

One major rule of thumb to always follow: If the seller won't ride the horse, take a cue and neither should you! If you are a very confident and competent rider and have seen video of the horse and longed him and read his body language to know that the horse is OK, then probably it will be OK. But in general, *don't*. Watch them ride him and see how he responds to their cues. Watch his mannerisms and reactions and make sure he looks sound and like something you can handle. When you do get on, start out slowly, walk, turn, and stop. Feel him out. Notice how he moves off your leg. Does he respond to shifts of your weight? How much rein pressure does it take to stop? Be safe, be attentive, and go slowly before moving into faster gaits.

If you like the horse but aren't sure you trust the seller, or for that matter, your own instincts, ask if you can come back and ride him a second time at a later date. Most people will not have a problem with this. You also can ask if the seller would be willing to do a two-week trial before purchase, so that you can take the horse to your home or barn and see how he adapts to new surroundings and fits in your life. Not all sellers will consider this because so many things can go wrong, and most will require insurance on the horse for the time in your care, plus a deposit, possibly nonrefundable. But it doesn't hurt to ask if this is something you would like to do. Another thing you can do is go back for a second, or even third, visit accompanied by a trainer you trust to get their opinion. If you do this, take their comments seriously but also with a grain of salt — remember you are the one who will be living with the horse, so something they can't stand, you might not mind.

## BUYING SIGHT UNSEEN

Sometimes life throws obstacles in our way that make it impossible for us to go see the horse of our dreams who has passed muster on the video, photos, and in conversations with the seller. He just seems perfect. Ask for more videos — the seller can be your eyes. Videos have gotten very simple to take in the modern day. Everyone seems to have a camera on their phone to take videos of a horse being led around, walking straight to — and from — the camera. Even views of the bottom of his feet are not amiss. If you plan to trail ride and all his videos are in a show frame, ask for a video of the horse being ridden on a relaxed loose rein at all three gaits. It's a buyer's market out there right now, so don't worry too much about being a pain. Be very nice about it, express your gratitude for the seller's help, but get the material you need to make as educated a purchase as possible.

## PRICE NEGOTIATION AND CONTRACT

Generally you will negotiate the price and agree on a contract before you do the vet check. Most people will price their horse with at least a little wiggle room for negotiation. Some people price with a lot of wiggle room, and some people are firm. Many people will take payments with a term agreement, and some will add in a trial period before you are fully committed to buy. If you are buying on terms, expect the seller to require you to insure the horse with the seller named as loss payee. Some people will require the horse to stay on their property until the horse is paid for and you will be expected to pay all expenses — make sure that the terms are spelled out clearly in the contract so that you aren't hit with any surprises. If you are taking the horse on trial, expect to make a down payment that will be refunded only if you return the horse in the condition it was in when it left. All I can say is that it won't hurt to ask, whether you want a lower price, payments, trial, etc. If you are worried about offending the seller with a too low offer, just be apologetic and polite and generally it won't upset anyone — just do not be surprised if they say no. If the horse has a problem revealed on the vet check that will require more maintenance or veterinary care to correct the problem than you had anticipated but you still want the horse, you can also renegotiate a lower price at that time because of the unforeseen complications. Anything is possible; just be friendly yet professional in your dealings and get everything in writing!



## VET CHECK

Sometimes the emotional investment in a new horse is bigger than the financial investment, so you would not want to purchase a horse who appears to be fine, and then find out four months later he has a cataract in his eye and will be blind in two years. Imagine the heartbreak. Or severe arthritis in his front fetlocks that will prevent him from doing the discipline you purchased him for. Yes, you could change your plans and do western pleasure instead of cross country jumping, because you love him so much, but that would be sad and unnecessary when a vet check can help you avoid the heartbreak. If you aren't spending much and just plan to pleasure ride and feel you have a pretty good eye for the horse, then you can opt to skip the vet check, but generally I strongly recommend it and any good seller will do the same because there is no way to know everything about the horse, even if you have had horses your whole life.

If the horse is within an hour or so of your regular vet, then definitely try to set up the appointment with him. He knows you, your needs and situation and will be your best adviser. If the horse is not within an area your vet can travel to, then you will need to ask for recommendations. You should ask the seller for names of a few vets in their area that are NOT their usual vet. If you know of any trainers in the area, ask them who they would use. If you are buying a performance horse, you will want to choose a vet who is specialized or at least interested in equine athletes and sports medicine as they will be more realistic about problems and their long-term solutions. If you are buying a broodmare, use a breeding vet. If you just want a basic vet check, then choose an all-around farm vet used to seeing a little bit of everything. The main thing is, don't use the seller's personal vet because it could cause an ethical problem for the veterinarian if they are wanting to help their client sell a horse.



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Go into a pre-purchase exam knowing that the vet's job is to find a problem. If he doesn't find a problem he will probably be worried he missed something. A majority of veterinary lawsuits are over pre-purchase exams so some vets will be really leery and perhaps overly dramatic about their findings. Remember — there is no perfect horse. Generally, you will go into a pre-purchase exam with a basic health exam, plus flexions for soundness. If any flexion shows positive for a low-grade lameness, the vet might suggest an X-ray of the potential problem area. Some horses are just sensitive and show a positive on certain flexions because the test is uncomfortable — can you hold your knee up and tightly flexed for 30 seconds and trot off sound? You might also want to X-ray specific areas that are important to your discipline, such as hocks and front feet, whether they show a problem or not — just to ease your mind. Even if you *know* you are going to purchase the horse regardless of the findings, the X-rays might be nice to have down the road as a benchmark. So when the vet finds something, be it a spur on the hock, an OCD cyst in a stifle, or a negative palmar angle in a front foot, ask the vet how this affects the horse for his intended use and future soundness, and what kind of maintenance can be expected to keep the horse sound, and how much that costs. If he says the horse may need to have hock injections in several years when he is in his teens ... well, most any horse used hard will probably need some maintenance in his teens. Stay realistic and ask a *lot* of questions. Some things like bone chips, severe arthritis in multiple joints, neurological disorders, torn tendons, etc., will be definite “no buys,” but many things can be worked through.

Just remember, the vet's job is not to “pass” or “fail,” it is to find problems and explain the potential repercussions to you. If it is not your vet and a finding is iffy, you can have the X-rays sent to your regular vet for a second opinion.

Finding a new horse can be time-consuming, sometimes depressing, oftentimes fun, and hopefully, in the end, very exciting and the culmination of your dreams come true! Don't get discouraged if it takes a while, and don't settle for “just OK” because you will regret it down the road. When you meet your future friend and partner, you will know — you will get that special feeling and know you have found him. Enjoy the search!



*About the horses:* page 140: Allegro NS (The Source CC x Ambianse); page 142-143, top left: Alis Topaz (Rohara Moonstorm x WC Willows Alibi); top right: Sandflash G (Gorec x Sand And Sable); page 144, top left: Pinnacle Princess (Zee Ty x Handy Gal) [unregistered]; top right: WC Jamaica Jamaal (Jake Jamaal JCA x WC Enya Dreams).

*About the author:* Wendye Gardiner runs Solstice Training Center LLC in Aubrey, Texas, where she trains, markets, sells, and shows to the National level in several disciplines. Twenty years of experience and wonderful opportunities to work with some of the best names in the business have given her the ability to individualize her training perspective to each particular horse and she loves to teach interested people how to do it themselves. In selling, she wants to match up horse and buyer for lifelong companionship and she's glad to help others learn to do the same for the benefit of the horse.