



Julie Goodnight's Horse Buying Guide

When it's time to look for a new horse, you want to be an educated buyer—use this guide to help you better understand what to look for and what questions to ask as you shop for your dream horse. You'll want to find the safest and best-trained horse that your money can buy. You will love a horse that makes you feel safe; get one that you can build confidence with instead of constantly re-building.

Your purpose and goal for riding:

It's very important to identify exactly how you plan to use your new horse because you cannot fit a square peg into a round hole. Spend some time thinking about what your short and long term goals are; be realistic in terms of your time commitment and physical ability. If your time commitment is limited, you'll need a very well-trained and seasoned horse that can stand around for days or weeks and still ride easy, not a "project" horse that is young or poorly trained. If your goals include competitive riding, you'll need a horse that is the right type, with good athletic ability and solid training. The more demanding the competition, the more type and training plays a role.

It may be that you want an all-around horse that you can do a variety of things with, from casual trail riding to dressage, both English and western. If so, realistically rank all the activities you plan so you can set up a list of priorities so that you can evaluate individual horses and rate their best qualities.

Realize that one horse may not suit your long term goals, particularly if you plan to compete regularly. If you are just starting out as a beginner, you need a steady, solid mount that has a lot of patience; these horses are typically not the sharpest athletes. As you reach higher levels of riding, you'll need a horse that can move up the levels with you. Maybe you'll need a starter horse and in a few years you'll be ready to move up to a highly bred and trained performer that will propel you to the highest levels (start saving your money now!). Don't get caught in the trap of thinking you'll keep every horse you have for the rest of its life; horses are not like dogs. While it is possible that you may keep one horse forever, you may find that the horse you buy does not turn out to be the best horse for you in the future and you will need to sell him and move onto another.

Seek out support:

Find a trainer that specializes in the discipline you'd like to work in or seek out a friend that has more horse experience than you do to help you weigh your shopping options throughout the process. There are seller's agents and buyer's agents. You need a buyer's agent that you can pay his/her regular hourly fee to look at horses for you. Or you could engage a trainer to look for horses for you for a finder's fee (be wary of commissions for buyer's agents since that encourages the trainer to look for an expensive horse). Most often what you encounter is the seller's agent (like with real estate), who is receiving a commission on the sale (usually 10%); therefore you may not get all the info you need about the horse. Be very leery of double-dipping agents (taking a commission from both buyer and seller). It's best to have an objective third-party agent who has no motivation other than to give you his/her honest opinion. Be wary of trainers that are trying to sell you one of their own horses or another client's horse—again, they may lose objectivity.

Conformation and characteristics:

Horses with the best conformation will most likely come with a higher price tag. Good conformation is not only important for horses that will have athletic demands on them, but also for any horse. Good conformation is directly related to longevity; the better built a horse is, the longer he will remain structurally sound and useful.

1. Trapezoid: ideally, the horse's body is like a trapezoid, with a long sloping shoulder, a long sloping hip and a short back. A long-backed horse is generally less athletic and more likely to encounter
2. Straight legs
3. Proportion
4. Height for your build and riding purpose
5. Facial Features: A lot about temperament can be judged by a horse's facial characteristics and breed or body type and an experienced hand with a keen eye can judge a horse's temperament in short order. Check out my favorite antique books by Professor Jesse Beery.

Mare vs. gelding:

Mares are more likely to form bonded relationships within the herd. This is a fact of horse behavior. So on the one hand, this can make your relationship with your mare much more meaningful and rewarding. On the other hand, if you betray her or give her a reason to distrust you (as the Parelli guy did), she will hold it against you much more than a gelding or stallion. Bonded relationships are a double-edged sword. In general, geldings are much more forgiving than mares.

A good match:

There are also some horses that will take good care of beginner riders, but run a more advanced rider through the ringer. These are horses that have learned to appreciate that beginner riders won't require much of them but that advanced riders will be very demanding and they have learned to prefer the beginners. It is not a good thing when a horse learns that he can act one way with one type of rider and totally different with another. Ideally, a horse would never learn to discriminate between different riders, but the smart ones often do.

When selecting an appropriate horse, the rider's age, ability level, size and personality should be matched with the horse's age, training level, size and temperament. Judging the training and temperament of a horse is best done by an experienced hand; someone that has worked with literally hundreds of different horses and can figure out a horse's temperament and training with minimal exposure to the horse.

The worst-case scenario is placing a young child or "green" rider on a green horse. If you're new to riding, choose a horse that can be your best teacher. It's not the same as getting a puppy for a kid to grow up with—you want a well-trained horse that can understand what cues you mean and what shifts in balance are probably unintentional. A young horse will take every shift in balance or mistake as a cue they should have known and be instantly confused and difficult to retrain.

Age:

I like to look at horses in the 10 to 15 year old range that have been trained by a professional trainer. Horses in this age range have had experience and time—so that you have fun and enjoy your ride instead of having a full-time training project. You can always buy training and experience cheaper than you can add it to a horse who is less expensive to purchase.

Questions to ask:

1. Why is the horse for sale?
2. Is the price firm? Assume that the price isn't set in stone unless otherwise stated. If you're shopping for a horse that's in a \$10,000 range, don't hesitate to look in the \$15,000-\$20,000 range. You don't know how long the horse has been for sale and how urgently the seller needs to sell.

On your test ride:

Notice if the horse is already saddled and ask how much the horse has already been worked. Ideally, you'll get to see the horse "naked" first and observe the horse's ground manners and manners during saddling. You also want to make sure that the horse didn't need hours of riding before the sellers allow you to ride.

When it's time to buy:

Trial periods, veterinarian checks, safest way to pay, have a written contract....

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