The Importance of Pre-Purchase Exams

For horse people, the purchase of a new horse is an exciting time. Unfortunately, many horses are purchased that are not suitable for their intended use. This lack of suitability is most often due to a lameness problem that was not noticed at purchase, but can result from anything from behavioral to general health issues.

As an equine veterinarian, I often run into the scenario when a horse has already been purchased and then found to have a problem. It is a great disappointment for a new horse owner to learn that they have just bought a horse with a handicap that will make it difficult or impossible for the horse to perform its intended use or at its intended level, and that it may now be impossible to return the horse to the seller or sell it.

The goal of this article is to explain the goals, components and limitations of the pre-purchase exam and to encourage readers to have it performed before they buy a horse. Even when the purchase price is low, the cost of horse ownership is always very high. I believe that if you buy a horse, it should be one that is sound and in line with your needs. In the horse business it is buyer beware! A pre-purchase exam is a very smart investment in peace of mind.

COMPONENTS & GOALS

A pre-purchase examination is a thorough veterinary exam performed on a horse before a buyer agrees to purchase it. After deciding on the specifics of what the exam will entail, the buyer pays a veterinarian for his or her objective evaluation of the horse, taking into account a balance of factors. After the exam, the veterinarian usually provides a written report to the buyer detailing their exam findings and recommendations. The goal is an educated buyer, who will be

satisfied should they proceed with the purchase given their specific requirements.

Clear and honest communication between the buyer, seller and veterinarian, before the exam is conducted is extremely important. Examples of this include:

- A clarification of the buyer's expectations and goals for the horse. This means a discussion of the buyer's experience level and intensity of intended use for the horse. I generally ask the buyer if they have any special reservations or concerns about the horse at this time.
- The buyer's expectations of the exam. Pre-purchase exams can be very basic or can employ all sorts of diagnostic tests, depending on the buyer's budget and their willingness to assume risk. The exam is often radically different for a horse purchased as a trail horse for an inexperienced rider than for one purchased as a high level dressage or Western performance horse.
- A discussion with the seller. Information I like to get from the seller includes the work history and prior performance level of the horse, and especially the horse's recent work schedule and intensity of that work. I also ask questions about general care and management, any special care given and any health problems the horse might have had, including prior lameness and colic.

THE EXAM

I offer a standard, core pre-purchase exam. The price for this exam does not include any diagnostic tests. These are added at the end of the exam as needed and depending on intended use, the buyer's expectations and risk aversion, and my findings in the initial exam.

I perform an initial quick assessment of the horse's basic health at rest, which includes inspecting it to confirm that

its age and general description match to the buyer's understanding. I then follow with a brief, initial lameness exam. If the horse is found to be sick, unsuitable, or lame in this early part of the exam, then the exam is stopped and the buyer pays a minimum fee. The rest of the examination is canceled or delayed.

Lameness is the most common and significant problem encountered in a purchase exam. Thus the lameness part is very detailed and makes up the bulk of the exam. I start by carefully examining the musculoskeletal system. I then watch the horse move through a variety of patterns both in hand and loose in a round pen and on different footings. Next, I perform flexion exams and hoof tester application. If I find that the horse is lame, I stop the exam.

If my general sense is that the lameness is not chronic or severe, I might advise the buyer that they shift the burden onto the seller and his veterinarian to diagnose and treat the lameness for a period of time. The seller must satisfy me that the problem is not serious and poses no threat to the goals of the buyer, and the horse must undergo a full recovery before the exam is rescheduled. If, on the other hand, the lameness appears to likely be of a more chronic or debilitating nature I generally advise my client that they search for another horse.

If the horse is sound from a lameness standpoint, then examination of all of the other body systems is completed. If all of this is done, and the horse is sound and healthy, then I discuss other tests that might provide additional information and even greater security in the decision to purchase. Additional tests are done depending on the buyer's needs and budget, and my recommendations for that particular case.

Additional tests include radiography (x-ray), ultrasound, reproductive tests, blood tests, and drug testing. For performance horses, a series of radiographs on the front feet

and hocks might be advised. For a broodmare, reproductive ultrasound and other reproductive tests may be appropriate. Sometimes, we perform drug screens to ensure that the horse is not medicated during the exam.

Some veterinarians include radiographs, as a part of every purchase exam. There are advantages to this approach. Even if a horse is not lame, the horse may have an abnormality that would not have been found otherwise. This problem may raise concerns about the soundness of the horse. Radiographs and other diagnostics done at the time of purchase also serve as a baseline so that progression of a problem can be assessed.

However, sometimes diagnostic tests complicate what was a clear picture. An example of this is when a sound horse is found to have a subtle problem visible only on radiographs. For each specific finding, there is a different risk that the problem will interfere with the intended use of the horse. This is where the whole process becomes as much of an art as a science. The significance assigned to a given problem depends on the veterinarian's experience and knowledge of the problem and the typical outcome he or she has experienced for this problem, in a horse of this type, engaged in this activity, at this level.

I do not "pass" or "fail" a horse in a pre-purchase exam. It is always the buyer's decision whether or not to proceed with the purchase. My job is to objectively provide the buyer with all of the information needed to help him or her make an informed decision.

PITFALLS & LIMITATIONS

- Accurate prediction of the future is impossible.
- Often, the buyer and seller are not present for the exam so communication among parties is difficult and can be strained.
- It is risky to examine a horse that has not been in work. Lameness problems may not be visible during the

exam but can show up when the horse is put back into work later.

- It is risky to perform a partial or incomplete exam. Often the one area not examined ends up being a problem.
- There is a potential conflict of interest if the veterinarian ordinarily works for the seller or is perceived as working for both buyer and seller. Ideally the seller's veterinarian does not do the exam. If they do, they often require the buyer to sign a document stating that they understand the risk inherent in hiring them to perform the exam and waive this conflict of interest.
- If the sale does not go through, one or both parties may be angry or disappointed.
- Different veterinarians perform the exam differently, and have different levels of expertise with horses of different breeds, types and performing different types of work.
- There are risks in examining a horse under less than optimal conditions. I only perform the exam under conditions that I am comfortable with, and usually only at my facility. It is risky to assess a horse in unfamiliar or irregular footing because it is easy to miss a subtle problem.
- Pre-purchase exams have been performed by veterinarians for a very long time but given today's litigious climate, many veterinarians try to avoid conducting them. They commonly form the basis of lawsuits against veterinarians.
- If you look hard enough, you will find a problem. The question is not whether a problem exists, it is whether the problem will interfere with the buyer's intended use of the horse.

CONCLUSION

In my opinion, buyers should have a pre-purchase exam performed before buying any horse, regardless of cost. It is a smart investment. Prior to conducting this exam the expectations and communication among all parties must be very clear. The limitations and variables inherent in the pre-purchase exam must be understood by all parties. When these guidelines are followed, it can be a satisfying experience for everyone.

It is very important to remember that no horse is perfect. Sometimes the most unlikely candidates make up for their less than ideal conformation and physical potential with “heart” – that intangible quality that a few equine and human athletes have. This is hard to evaluate in the pre-purchase exam and is a subjective assessment made by the buyer. A familiar example of the importance of this is the story of Seabiscuit.

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