



Finding an Event Horse

An Insider's Guide

Part II: The Buyer

By Craig and Jan Thompson

Like most professional horsepeople, a large part of our business is teaching and training event horses and riders. But compared to other eventing professionals, we both buy and sell a lot of horses. As a result, we have seen pretty much every aspect of the horse buying process. We've seen it be messy, complicated, and not much fun. We've also seen it be educational, enjoyable, and successful. It is our belief that it need not be an agonizing process, and that with a little guidance most amateurs can do it without too much mental, emotional, or financial pain.

What can you buy?

Once you have established how much you can spend, be realistic. Remember, you are buying a horse, so whatever the figure you settle on, you had better be prepared to not only spend that amount, but also to lose it forever. It's hard enough for professionals to make money on horses; amateurs shouldn't even try. So if the range you are comfortable with is \$15,000 to \$20,000, have \$15,000 to \$20,000 extra lying around. As difficult as it may be, before you ever go shopping, prepare yourself for the fact that once you pay for the horse you find, you may never see your money again. As an amateur, you are not in the business of making a living with horses. You are involved in a very rewarding hobby that requires an expensive piece of equipment to enjoy—a horse. For most amateur buyers, the horse is not an investment that will return financial gains. The right horse will, however, prove its value time and again in the form of safe trips cross-country and the satisfaction of having a dependable, enjoyable partner.

What is appropriate?

We are often amazed by what buyers think they want versus what they, from our perspective as professionals, actually need. There has been a trend in the last few years for every buyer to want a horse to take them through the advanced level. Many buyers say they want a horse to take to their first three-day event. Neither is necessarily a bad goal. But success with horses is incremental and takes considerable time. Given that every buyer is at a different place in his or her riding career, view each horse that you buy as a stepping stone to the next horse and the next level of accomplishment in your riding.

In purchasing a new horse, a rider that has already competed at the preliminary level may have his eye on a horse that can be successful at the intermediate level. But a rider that has only spent a year at the novice level does not necessarily need to find a horse to take preliminary. In fact, a horse that could provide that rider with a year of good training level experience may fit the bill perfectly.

Be realistic in your assessment of yourself. Set goals that can actually be attained. And then try to find a horse to suit. One note of caution: the horse that suits may come in a variety of different packages. Try to avoid turning a blind eye to horses that don't fit your ideal to a "T," but that will nonetheless help you reach your goals. Issues of age and experience are less important than suitability.

Working with an Agent

Once you've established what you can afford and what type of horse is appropriate, consider using the services of an agent. Often your trainer or a reputable professional in your area will be willing to act in this capacity. If you see a horse at an event that you like, ask how and where the owner found it. You might just discover that there was an agent behind the deal who has a knack for matching horses and riders.

A good agent should be able to help arrange horse shopping trips, research horses that you are interested in, interpret a horse's record, analyze its suitability, and identify the significant findings of a pre-purchase exam. No



Expect to try quite a few prospects in your quest, and don't forget to enjoy the process.

agent has a crystal ball. It's unfair to ask an agent to predict whether or not you will win with a particular horse. It's impossible for an agent to know if a horse will stay sound. But a good agent should be willing, if it becomes necessary, to help you sell the horse on again.

Depending on what type of horse you are looking for, an agent with local contacts and experience may be perfectly adequate. However, an agent with national or international contacts can broaden the pool of horses for you to consider. Regardless, when asking for an agent's help, establish the terms up front. When working with an agent, be prepared to pay a daily fee, expenses, and a commission based on the purchase price of any horses bought.

Arranging a Trip

Whether you use an agent's help or arrange a trip on your own, there are a couple natural places to go to look at horses. Middleburg, Virginia; Unionville, Pennsylvania; and Southern

Pines, North Carolina are the big three, with Ocala, Florida and Aiken, South Carolina, particularly during January and February, quickly gaining ground.

Middleburg, Unionville, and Southern Pines have large year-round eventing populations and consequently a buyer can often see several horses in the course of a day or two. Aiken and Ocala have large, seasonal populations as northern-based riders and farms move south for the winter. For buyers coming to the East Coast, we recommend flying into Washington Dulles International Airport and spending a day and a half looking in Virginia, and then making the three-hour drive to Unionville on the second day to spend the third day there. Having an unscheduled fourth day available allows a buyer to go back to a farm for a second, follow-up visit to any horses that really stood out. Just six hours south of Middleburg, for those willing to do enough driving, it's not hard to add a day in Southern Pines to the itinerary.

When calling farms in preparation for a trip, don't be afraid to ask for the names and numbers of other horse-people in the area that may be able to show you a suitable prospect. And once you have an idea of which farms you will be visiting, don't be afraid to ask for suggestions on scheduling or accommodations. Often the people you will be dealing with will know the process and area better than you. Their insight can make your trip easier and your use of time more efficient.

Trying a Horse

Trying horses is tough, even for very good riders. Trying strange horses in a strange place with all eyes turned your way and a video camera rolling can be downright nerve wracking. Or, it can be fun and educational. When we have buyers trying a horse, after we have ridden it around and shown it off a little, we often end up essentially teaching the buyer a riding lesson. Some buyers are uncomfortable with that, but they shouldn't be. In helping them figure out how all the buttons and pedals work on a horse they've never ridden but that we've trained every day, we're simply allowing them to avoid re-inventing the wheel. We know the horse; let us help you get to know it.



Left and below: When you start out trying a new horse, ask him the basics. What does it take make the horse go? To stop? To turn left and right? Once comfortable on the flat, try a small jump. When you've trotted a cross rail successfully, consider trotting into a line and cantering out. Don't expect it to feel perfect.

Further, don't be afraid to practice a little basic sports psychology. As you swing yourself into the tack and wonder what you're in for, smile, relax, and breathe. Remind yourself that riding is fun, trying horses and meeting new people is fun, and even if you don't like the horse, at least it will give you a basis of comparison for other horses.

When you first start out, try the basics. What does it take make the horse go? To stop? To turn left and right? Once comfortable on the flat, try a small jump. When you've trotted a cross rail successfully, consider trotting into a line and cantering out. Don't expect it to feel perfect. Don't expect yourself or the horse to be perfect. As an amateur looking for an appropriate horse, consider how the horse handles your mistakes. An amateur's horse needs to have a sense of humor because over time you're going to test what he thinks is funny. The ideal horse won't take it personally when you yank him in the teeth over a jump or grind away on his back trying to sit the trot. These are things you should keep in mind while trying horses; you won't be perfect when you try him, which is fine, because you won't be perfect if you buy him and take him home.

As for what is appropriate to try



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with a horse you are considering, consult with the seller, consult with your trainer or agent, and consult your common sense. In our business, we won't necessarily let a rider try a horse over cross-country jumps. The risk is often too high. But there's no reason not to at least ask if you can hack the horse out or ride it outside the ring. Better yet, if you like a horse the first time you try it, ask if you can come back a second time the next day. And the second time, ask a bit more of yourself and the horse. Doing so can make your decision that much easier.

Do your Research

In the U.S., every horse that competes in a USEA recognized event at novice and above has a USEA number and a competition record. This record is available from the USEA by making a phone call. The only information you will need is the horse's name. Before you buy a horse, if you have any questions about its record, call and ask for it. You can have it faxed or emailed to you. The record probably won't be perfect. It may show a run out or an elimination on cross-country, a rail down in the show jumping or a high dressage mark. None of these things is a reason in and of itself not to buy a horse. It is, however, information you should know. If you are considering a horse that has competed in England, the process is even easier. Online, visit www.britisheventing.com where you can search for a horse or rider by name and have the results displayed immediately.

The Skinny

Buying horses successfully requires forethought and planning. If you are involved with horses long enough, at some point you will buy the right horse and at some point you will buy the wrong horse. That's part of the deal; welcome to the club. But by putting in a bit of legwork, utilizing the help of an agent, and knowing what to expect, the process can be relatively efficient and with practice, even gratifying.

Next issue... What can you live with in a horse? 

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