

Buying An Event Horse Part III

Suitability: Size, Temperament, and What You Can Live With

By Craig and Jan Thompson

If buying a new horse is in your near future, you have probably already found a selection of horses to look at and hopefully have considered how much you are willing to pay. You may have arranged a trip to a horsey area or used the service of an agent. With those issues settled, as you start to actually consider different horses, the question of what type of horse is suitable must be addressed.

According to the dictionary, suitability is defined as "appropriate to the purpose intended." Buyers, in conjunction with their trainers, must be very honest in determining the intended purpose of the horse they are purchasing, and even more careful in considering whether or not it is appropriate. For most adult amateurs, the purpose intended is to take lessons, compete at the lower levels, and have fun. The goals of a top international rider or an up-and-coming Young Rider are obviously different.

Most professionals already know what they want, most Young Riders are just thrilled at the idea of having a good horse, and most amateurs have only a vague notion of what they need. While considering each of these groups of riders, the focus of this article is geared towards the adult amateur, as this group seems to have the most desire for and least access to good knowledge.

For the average adult amateur, there are two basic considerations to be evaluated as part of answering the question, "Is this horse suitable?" The first is temperament, the second size.



Characteristics such as scope, movement, and soundness are irrelevant if the horse and rider don't match in these two key areas.

By comparison, an appropriate horse for an adult amateur rider is not necessarily the same horse that is appropriate for an ambitious Young Rider or a seasoned international competitor. A top event rider with lots of miles at all levels of the game is not likely to be intimidated by a horse coming out of the start box like a torpedo, and is competent to relax a tense horse or school a tricky horse. Because of their increased skill, top riders can generally accommodate a wider variety of character traits in the horses that they ride.

However, size does matter. Regardless of gender, a rider who is 5'4" and talented will still quite likely struggle to compress a large horse's frame, which can be a problem at a cross-country exercise as common as a coffin. Further, if the size inequity doesn't

cause a problem at the preliminary level, it will become an increasingly more significant problem moving up through the levels. Don't believe it? After years of riding horses that averaged 16.3 hands, the only rider to win two medals at last year's Pan American Championships did so aboard a horse that measures just barely 15.3. The reason behind this is not a mystery. Cross-country riding is hard. It requires an ability to change a horse's shape, from flat out gallop between jumps to a collected canter at tricky combinations. Doing so requires both upper body strength and the leverage provided by height. Be it a professional, Young Rider or amateur, a small rider on a large horse is at a disadvantage as soon as he or she leaves the start box.

The ranks of the Young Riders divisions are filled with quite a broad spectrum of riders in terms of both ability and financial backing. Though a bit of a gross generalization, Young Riders often

start with no formal riding education and little experience, and therefore just as often have no fear. They get on and kick on, as often as not with the first horse they've ever owned, and unlike adult amateurs don't worry about getting hurt or being able to pay the mortgage. Ignorance being bliss, this often leads to magical relationships and has been the start of many a successful riding career.

The reason a good Young Rider's horse is so smart is that it has been forced to figure things out with little or no help. The horse gets crafty quickly or it doesn't stay in the game. As a result, temperaments can vary a bit within this group of horses—most Young Riders don't have the experience to know that there is anything different out there than what they are already sitting on. If their horse is hot, it certainly won't bother them; if their horse is lazy, they kick a bit harder. As riders they generally don't know anything else. Size, however, remains a factor. Without exception these riders are better off on a horse that they have outgrown a little bit but ride well than on one that is too big and consequently unrideable.

Because of the aforementioned factors, top riders and Young Riders have a bit of wiggle room when it comes to suitability. With adult amateurs, the wiggle room with regard to size and temperament narrows. Further, amateurs often over think the process of selecting the right horse. In doing so, they devise lists of criteria that must be met regarding age and experience but fail to fully credit the importance of character. As a result, they often miss out on the right horse.

The Age Factor

Many amateur riders get hung up on having a horse between eight and 12 years old, or some other equally misleading window. The thinking behind this seems to be that by this age a horse will be mature enough to tolerate an amateur. In reality, the right horse may be five, ten, or 15. While it may be a consideration to a buyer, a horse doesn't know how old it is and doesn't care. A horse doesn't turn ten and think, "Now that I'm ten, I'd better let him yank on my teeth." The wrong horse for an amateur won't ever



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be right for the job no matter how old it is. Alternatively, the right horse for an amateur will be born as solid as Mt. Rushmore and will demonstrate this trait as early as its career begins.

Experience

Some amateurs insist that their new horse have experience at a level higher than they intend to compete, thinking that the horse will then have the experience to somehow compensate for the rider's lack of miles. Here's another little secret out of the bag: horses don't know what level you've entered them. There are plenty of horses that have gone advanced but will never be appropriate for an amateur to learn the ropes at training level, while there are other horses that will never go preliminary but will tolerate riders year after year at the novice and training levels.

Veterinary and Other Considerations

With regards to suitability, if the horse is of the right size and temperament, a rider, no matter what their goals, can live with a lot of things that are less than ideal. While a veterinary pre-purchase exam is a useful thing, it is not a crystal ball. Even if horsemen had a crystal ball to look into, when asked about a specific horse, its answer would always be the same: "It's going to limp." That is the nature of horses. They all limp sometime, even the good ones, so be prepared for it.

From a trainer's perspective of the veterinary considerations, there is little more frustrating than to have an amateur not buy the right horse because of an essentially inconsequential physical consideration. Some of the things you can live with include well-healed bowed tendons, certain types of heart murmurs, some breathing noises, mildly impaired eyesight, glue-on shoes, bar shoes, many types of arthritic changes evident on radiographs, and less-than-perfect flexion tests. When considering the significance of these things, ask the basic question, "Is the horse currently doing what I want to do?" If the answer is yes, then the significance of the physical concern may be minimal and not an impairment.

Additionally, if the horse is of the right size and temperament, you can also live with a mare, a cribber, or an ex-racehorse. Gender aside, a mare is

exactly the same as a gelding—some are good event horses and some aren't. In this country we don't see as many mares competing, not because mares are bad, but for the simple fact that we are dependent on the racing industry for horses. When a racehorse is done with its racing career, if it's a gelding it's sold on, and if it's a mare it gets sent to the breeding shed.

Vices in horses are like vices in people—they come with the territory. The two most common, cribbing and weaving, might be annoying, but they don't affect a horse's ability to perform. Ignore the behavior and buy the horse. You won't notice either trait when you're in the tack or enjoying a victory gallop.

As for racehorses, amateurs should not go to the track and buy a horse. Nor should they buy a horse that is recently off the track. Doing so would be unwise. However, refusing to consider a horse that raced but has since moved on to a new career will drastically limit the pool of available horses. Remember, just because a horse raced doesn't mean it ever went fast or enjoyed the job.

The Skinny

For amateurs, the right horse can come in many shapes and sizes. It may have done a two-star, it may only have gone novice or training. It might be a mare or a gelding, a Thoroughbred or a warmblood or a draft cross. The range of traits is vast, but the nature of the right horse is a constant. It must be the right size and it must have the temperament to tolerate mistakes. It must try a fourth and a fifth time after its rider made a mess of things the first, second, and third times. It must appreciate a good ride and forget about a bad ride. It should start, stop and turn easily. Standing for baths, letting you trim its ears and standing quietly for the blacksmith, while nice traits, don't mean a thing if it stops every time you drop your eye while cantering to a jump. Most amateurs find their balance by holding onto the reins; most amateurs miss at the jumps with some frequency; most amateurs bounce at the trot; most amateurs get nervous when they compete. As a result, an amateur's horse must be able to tolerate all its rider's foibles. If you are an amateur rider, when you find this horse, buy it. 🐾