

A local woman was killed recently while riding her newly purchased horse and, although I do not know all the circumstances first hand, the incident reminds me of many stories and cases that I do know of where human beings had, at the very least, a difficult time handling a new horse.

Beyond just getting the "right" horse for you, you need to know that horse as an individual in his familiar environment *before* you take him home and expect him to adjust to your facilities, equipment, and aspirations. When you believe you've found the perfect horse for you—before you buy him—spend time with his owner learning his routine, the tack/equipment used on him, his diet, individual needs, and as much about his past as you can possibly find.

What Is The Horse Used To?

You may think this to be a waste of time, but you have to know what your horse is used to so you won't be suddenly surprised later if you ask him something that he cannot understand.

If he has always been ridden in a snaffle and you put him in a Pelham, he is going to over-react to the more severe bit. If he has never felt a spur, you may have your hands full if you suddenly nail him in the sides. And it goes beyond this obvious consideration of "appliances" used on him; you need to know *how* his previous owner used what he/she used on this horse.

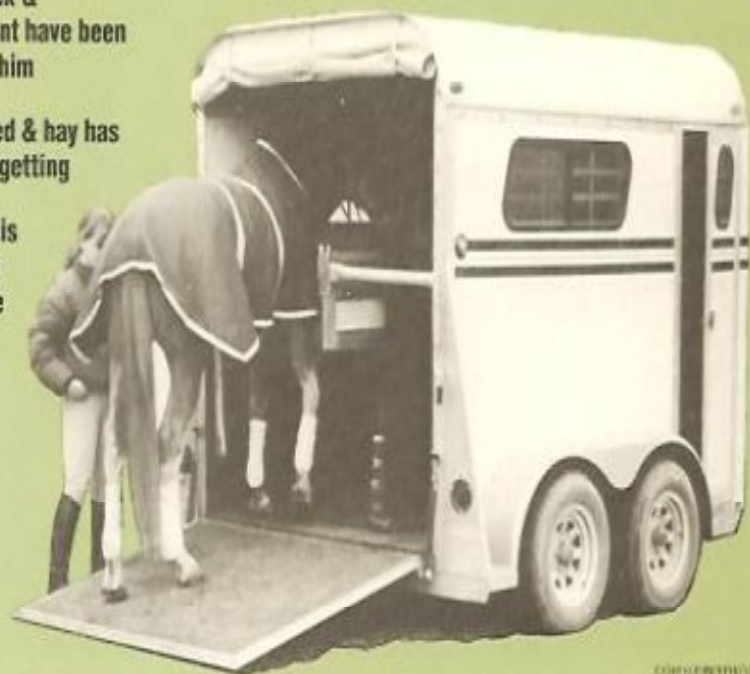
Certainly, you will accustom your new horse to doing things *your* way, but it must be over a period of time, gradually weaning him from old, familiar ways. Just imagine if he had never been longed and had never felt side reins. If you put him in side reins adjusted really short and had him on the longe line, he would panic.

THINGS TO ASK ABOUT YOUR NEW HORSE:

- What tack & equipment have been used on him
- What feed & hay has he been getting
- What's his worming schedule

- What stabling & fencing is he used to
- What are his fears, dislikes, & habits

- How is he tied—long rope, short rope, crossies, etc.



Diet & Fencing

It should go without saying that you need to change his diet very slowly from whatever he was receiving onto your own ration designed for him. It is important to know when he was last wormed so you won't overdose him, say, with an organophosphate five days after he received one, or worm him suddenly without your veterinarian's advice if he has gone years without being wormed.

If he has not had any access to pasture, you surely will not turn him out for the weekend on fresh, lush alfalfa.

Most of this is just common sense, but, in the excitement of new ownership, it can be easy to forget that *time* is needed for adjustment by both the horse and you.

Has your new horse ever been around electric fencing? Do you have a hot wire around the top of his paddock fence? If he hasn't ever touched

a hot wire, you may have a panic situation if you don't unplug the thing for a few days until he feels safe at home. Then he can get to know electricity without wanting to run though the opposite fence and flee.

Your new facilities will be strange, possibly confusing to him. Tie rags on poorly visible fences. Is he going from a barn full of other horses to isolation? If so, have a pony, a goat, a chicken, or a radio...something to help him overcome the separation.

Is he used to a stall, and is now going to be out in the elements? If the weather is bad, have a turn-out rug to put on him on wet, cold, windy nights. Then, of course, you need to find out if he has ever worn a rug. Find out what he is used to in saddles, too.

Horses are creatures of habit. Your new horse will adjust to you and your ways, developing new habits all along, but for a while, when worried or con-

fused, he will revert to his old ways. Be patient and stay alert for the first few months of ownership to any situation that seems to make him tense. You want to have years of joy with this new horse; it is worth a few months of effort to smooth the adjustment period.

Be sure to find out if the horse has any known fears such as an aversion to dogs, motorcycles, even open spaces. You can work to overcome spooky things *after* your horse knows you well and trusts you. In the beginning, avoid anything that will panic him and, should you find yourselves in just such a dangerous spot, calm him, dismount if that will help, and get away from the situation. Don't over-react and don't panic yourself.

Find out if he has ever been cross-tied. How does he feel about cross-ties? Does he hate to be tied short? Does he need a stout rope and halter because he will "test" being tied the first few times at a new place? Has he been to a lot of shows? Did he always travel with a companion? The list can go on forever, and every horse as well as every situation is an individual.

Honest Answers To Your Questions

Think of all the questions you can. Assure the seller that you want honest answers for the horse's sake. Tell the seller you realize that no horse is perfect and you need to know all you can to avoid accidents, to avoid confusing your new horse, and to help you make his adjustment to his new life a smooth and safe one.

You must not be judgmental, nor register any sign of shock/horror/disgust at the information you receive. The seller, being totally honest with you, is giving you a wonderful gift—insight into the mind and spirit of your horse. Thank him.

Remind yourself of this new horse's background. Review your own background. Then step out into the rich succession of experiences awaiting you both in your life together. ■

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