

Choosing a Racehorse to Ride

by Nanette Levin



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Finding the right mount can be a challenging process, but it can be even more daunting for the unseasoned buyer making their first foray into the world of former Thoroughbred racehorses. Fortunately, the experience can be rewarding, if you know what to look for, who to talk to and how to ask the right questions.

This month, we'll discuss some of the issues and opportunities available to you as you begin the selection process. Next month, we'll delve into common challenges and easy techniques to adapt as you take your former racehorse home and begin the process of encouraging him to be the mount you've dreamed about.

First, it's important to recognize that backside access is not usually granted to anyone who appears at the stable gate for entry. Someone needs to sign you into the stable area, and this is generally best arranged prior to your arrival. It's not that tough to get to know owners or trainers if you spend a little bit of time front side during races and keep your ears and eyes open, but don't bother trainers when they are busy saddling or running a horse. Like any kind of networking,

preparation and observation is important as you craft your plan. Better yet, find someone you know off the track who has access and knowledge of the players to help you start your search and gain the associated admittance to the morning training activities.

It's prudent to bring a trainer or seasoned horseman on your visits if you are not familiar with Thoroughbreds and/or lack a solid understanding of soundness issues and manifestations. Chances are, particularly if the horse is located on track grounds, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to schedule a vet check from an outsider. Consequently, it makes sense to have someone along with good eyes and a keen understanding of likely problems coupled with the means to identify issues casually. If you are spending significant money and your aim is a sound, long-term

"Gumby" (Night Bidder) was a favorite at Halcyon Acres. He was kind, gentle and dumb as a box of rocks. He was also a standout at the track, built like a warmblood at a huge 17.1 hands with an immensely wide frame to match, he's happily drop his head in anyone's lap who wanted to offer a little attention. He was a star when he started, never finishing out of the money. Suddenly, he wasn't competitive and we knew something was terribly wrong. Even though he showed no signs, we ultimately determined he was bleeding—bad. This horse was too special to risk further damage. We found a great home for him, selling him as a 3-day event horse adored by his new owner and her students. His incredibly willing attitude coupled with his inability to determine when he was being asked for too much (goes back to the sweet dumb thing), began to prove problematic at the Preliminary Level and he found a new home as a show jumper.

performance horse, insist on a vet check (which may require transporting the horse at your expense) and consider investing in x-rays of joints and ultrasounds of tendons and ligaments. It's not unusual for these horses to have problems unbenounced to (or unannounced by) the trainer or owner.

Interestingly, the winners aren't necessarily where you want to focus your search. Good racehorses have a ton of heart, and consequently, will run through injuries and create them in their drive to win. Those with less heart tend to slow down as soon as any pain ensues, generally protecting themselves from major strains, allowing others the glory of the winner's circle while heading back to the stable for a comfortable night's sleep. In this case, losers might be a better bet.

Soundness can be a big issue with racehorses. A horse that is winning isn't likely to wind up for sale unless there's a problem. There are a number of primary reasons Thoroughbreds go on the block:

1. They can't run.
2. They've just incurred a major injury (not always obvious in a site visit, particularly with a horse where drugs can mask the problem and the spit box is no longer of concern).
3. The owner is broke (this happens more than you may suspect, particularly at the smaller tracks).
4. The horse has run through conditions

and cannot be competitive in open races.

5. It's the end of the meet and it's not worth the cost of wintering a cheap claimer.

6. Old soundness problems have rendered the horse too sore to be competitive. Injuries are a concern, but horses being sold for other reasons may be good riding prospects for you.

Of course, all the circumstances surrounding why a horse may be for sale are too numerous to mention here, but these are often the most likely scenarios.

Know that racehorses can be very different when at the farm vs. at the track. If you've gained a referral from someone you trust, query about behavior at home. The biting, surly equine during racing season may be a kid's pet during the off-season (really). Still, don't assume you'll be able to transform a mean or sour horse by simply loving him. You can spend as much on a bad horse as a good one, both need to be fed and there's no sense in enduring the heartache of failing in your project by making a bad choice based on a desire to save a case. There are enough good animals available to new homes to be selec-

tive and cautious about ensuring your desire to gain a willing companion doesn't result in bringing home a lost cause.

Don't ever expect to get a chance for a test ride on a horse you are considering housed at the track. You need to be licensed to hop on a horse at almost every racetrack and insurance is a huge concern for all. You may, however, gain an opportunity to watch the horse train, provided you schedule in advance and request such a viewing. Of course, how the horse performs on the track will likely be very different from the mount you find at home, but this does give you a chance to watch the horse move, identify any major behavioral problems, get a sense for the horse's attitude and possibly chat with the exercise rider.

Much of the hype being presented concerning the care of these animals and the ethics of those who surround them is inaccurate—presented by those who have no first-hand exposure to the daily life at a race track and/or have an agenda of their own. Granted, these horses are often perceived as commodities, but in so being, the care they



Gumby showing his playful side off the racetrack. After retiring from racing, he enjoyed careers in 3-day eventing and show jumping.

receive is considerable and constant. Think about it—if your income were dependant, in part, on the level of attentiveness to the issues and needs of a significant asset, wouldn't it make sense to ensure that this racehorse is protected from harm or disability when possible? Know though, that there are some true
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horse lovers in the business and it behooves you to recognize this as you initiate conversations. Of course, there are those who are abusive and dishonest, but these individuals represent a limited minority.

The smaller tracks are likely your best hunting grounds. Get to know the players and try to ascertain whom you can trust prior to making final decisions. Most on the backside know who the bad eggs are and will steer you clear of them if you develop a friendly rapport.

Assume you are talking to horsemen when you visit a track. Ask about how others feel the horse may adapt to what you have in mind and why. Query your referrals on their ideas for transitioning the horse and where they may see issues and opportunities. Talk to the groom while he's working on the horse and observe



It's The Law was acquired by Halcyon Acres as a three-year-old. We knew her history and believed with some time off and gentle handling, we'd cure her soundness and sanity issues and have her performing at peak performance within a year. We were wrong. She got sound, but no saner and decided the effort involved in winning races was no longer worth the exertion. Clearly, she wasn't a good prospect for a riding horse and we found a new owner who was thrilled to have her bloodlines for a Thoroughbred broodmare at his posh facility.

where treatments are applied and the animal's behavior. Stand at the rail while the exercise rider gallops the horse and watch his expression, aids and the horse's responses. Let the people you are addressing feel like they are important advisors and you may discover things about your prospective purchase that would be otherwise undisclosed.

The trainer is the boss and should be treated with reverence. That doesn't mean that he necessarily knows the specifics about the behavioral or soundness issues of the horses in his barn. The exercise rider likely knows more about temperament idiosyncrasies and behavioral norms, and the groom can cue you into leg issues. Of course, the trainer, not you, pays them so their input may be influenced, but if they are instructed to be honest, many will offer frank opinions. A lot of trainers are beginning to understand the value of developing a rapport with those able to refer others to them for horses that need new careers, so strive to place an animal appropriately. Not all see long-term repercussions for their actions, so be observant.

There are some terrific potential riding horses bred for racing, but not able to stay the course for their intended career. There are also some good people to be found at the track that are honest, genuinely interested in making a good match with a new owner and focused on building long-term opportunities for all involved. Finding the right connections and prospective mounts can take some time and patience, but the rewards can be considerable. Rash behavior and decisions have a price too. If a former racehorse is your intended next project, it makes sense to hedge your bet and access the resources available to you to make the right choice. Handicapping isn't only for bettors.

Nanette Levin owns Halcyon Acres, a 120-acre facility in upstate New York that helps horses and riders start off on the right foot, teaches older horses with challenges to do the right thing, and connects riders with horses that are ideally suited to their needs. Visit www.halcyonacres.com to learn more.