



Navigating the pre-purchase exam

By Dr. Sarah Figley, DVM, PhD

Anyone who has bought a car knows that there are many factors that influence your decision — and the entire experience can put you through an emotional rollercoaster.

For the most part, buying a horse isn't any different. But a key tool that can help owners make a more informed decision about a potential horse is the pre-purchase examination that's usually conducted by their own veterinarian or another recommended clinician.

Dr. Sue Ashburner has examined hundreds of potential new horses for her clients during her 35-year career as a veterinarian.

"We don't do a 'pass-fail' when we do a pre-purchase exam on a horse. We just try to allow the buyer to make an informed decision on that horse," says Ashburner, a former clinical associate in equine field service at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine's Veterinary Medical Centre.

She suggests that before buying a horse, a potential owner should consider the "three S's": suitability serviceability and soundness. Results from the pre-purchase exam will help the buyer to address these areas.

During a pre-purchase exam, a veterinarian thoroughly evaluates the horse's physical status and determines if it will be serviceable for the buyer. At the same time, the practitioner is searching for future problems that could limit the horse's career — such as hidden problems in a joint. The exam is also the ideal time to gather baseline values on the animal as a comparison for future issues as well as for re-sale purposes.

The veterinarian's role is fairly straightforward – to evaluate the "serviceability" of the animal and to determine if the horse is physically sound. The exam, which can take half a day (or longer), includes a thorough physical examination (recording temperature, respiration, heart rate, heart, gut and lung sounds and cranial reflexes) and a detailed history of the animal.

The veterinarian will observe the horse's overall conformation but will specifically evaluate the angles of the horse (for example, the slope of the shoulder or angle of the hocks), body symmetry and body movements (both respiratory and gait), markings and joints and muscles. The practitioner will also examine the horse's teeth to confirm its age.

As all horse enthusiasts know, assessing the feet is also a critical component to any equine physical exam.

"No foot, no horse," says Ashburner.

Although veterinarians are often asked to comment on the price of the horse, its “suitability” or potential re-sale value, Ashburner says most clinicians won’t give their opinions. The buyer is responsible for deciding if the horse is suitable for their needs (such as jumping, endurance racing or Pony Club) and if the purchase price of the animal is reasonable.

If possible, Ashburner prefers buyers to be present at the time of the pre-purchase exam. The exercise is best done together since it assures the buyer that the correct horse is being examined. It also allows the buyer and veterinarian to have an open discussion about the concerns of the horse.

“I want them to see the pre-purchase exam through my eyes,” says Ashburner.

If the buyer can’t be there — as in the case of international buyers — she recommends that the buyer be available by phone during the exam or have a representative on site.

Ideally, Ashburner says the seller should also be present — although she admits that this may result in the buyer feeling intimidated during the exam process. However, having the seller present during the exam allows the veterinarian to ask further questions and to gather a detailed history of the horse’s injuries, lamenesses, medications, vices, colic and vaccinations.

The cost range for a pre-purchase exam varies in each province, and at the buyer’s request, veterinarians usually perform radiographs, endoscopies or other in-depth diagnostic procedures for additional fees. Ashburner stresses that while sellers are invited to attend the pre-purchase exam, the veterinarian’s written results are confidential and owned by the buyer.

“Unless verbal or written permission is granted, the seller doesn’t have access to the report — even if the potential buyer chooses not to go through with the purchase.”

Like most things, Ashburner accepts that the pre-purchase exam of horses has some shortcomings and the future outcomes can vary.

“A pre-purchase exam is like a snapshot in time,” says Ashburner. Although veterinarians conduct a comprehensive, thorough exam, the exam only represents the horse’s condition on *that* day. Result of the exam can’t predict future issues that may arise — things change.

“It’s like buying a car. You drive it off the lot and something goes wrong — only it’s [usually] under warranty, and horses are not,” Ashburner explains.

Another shortcoming of pre-purchase exams is that in some cases, they can lead to miscommunication, errors and legal disputes between buyers, sellers and veterinarians.

That potential for problems is why many veterinarians choose not to participate in equine pre-purchase exams, says Ashburner.

“In the U.S., the second highest area of litigation in equine practice is pre-purchase exams that have gone wrong.”

As for Ashburner, she doesn’t conduct pre-purchase exams for sellers since she believes that conducting a pre-purchase exam for a seller is a conflict of interest and puts her at risk for legal liability.

If a person is seriously considering buying a horse and the seller offers a “trial period,” Ashburner recommends taking the opportunity: being able to ride the horse and interact with it is a good way to know if it is suitable for your purposes. However, if a potential buyer decides to take a horse and try it out at home, she recommends buying a short-term insurance policy.

“If that horse breaks a leg at your house, you own it,” says Ashburner.

While a pre-purchase exam can be a good idea when you're considering buying a horse, Ashburner says buyers need to have realistic expectations and recognize that the pre-purchase exam doesn't eliminate the risk of buying a horse. There are no guarantees that the animal won't develop a physical issue somewhere down the road.

"There's no such thing as the perfect horse. It's like a used car – once horses have been used for a while, they *will* have glitches and things will be wrong."

Ashburner encourages potential horse buyers to consider the function that a new horse will serve, and after reviewing the results of the pre-purchase exam, decide whether the animal is "suitable" for them despite its flaws. After all, not all buyers are looking for a high-end racehorse or jumping horse.

"You may find a horse that's perfect for you and you can live with the problems we find in the pre-purchase exam."

Dr. Sarah Figley of Saskatoon, Sask., is graduate of the Western College of Veterinary Medicine (WCVM). Reprinted with permission from the WCVM Townsend Equine Health Research Fund (www.tehrf.ca) and Canadian Horse Journal. .

