

The pre-purchase veterinary examination

By Dr Mac

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Before you buy a horse, ask your veterinarian to give it a thorough examination, advises Dr Mac.



Don't depend on the seller's word. If you're buying a stallion for breeding, arrange for a fertility test.

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The term 'horse trading' for tough bargaining originated for good cause! The qualities and faults of a horse are often difficult to assess objectively unless you're an expert, and the buyer and seller have opposing financial goals: minimising and maximising the price paid.

Between these two shadow boxers stands the veterinarian, who has to act as a referee, based on a professional opinion. To reduce the chance of bias, the veterinarian always acts on behalf of, and is paid by, the buyer, and should not be the seller's usual veterinarian.

The seller's veterinarian is not obliged to give the buyer the horse's veterinary history. However, the seller can give his or her vet permission to do so, as it will show integrity.

In addition, if the seller is aware that the horse needs special shoeing or a specific diet to perform well, this should be mentioned to the buyer. A satisfied buyer who gets the expected results from a competition horse spreads the news and this will result in more sales.

The buyer chooses the veterinarian and pays for the vetting. If you are the buyer, tell the vet exactly what you're buying the horse for, as well as the price of the horse. A more expensive horse that you want to use for competition or breeding will require a more detailed and focused pre-purchase examination.

A broodmare or stallion needs to have breeding soundness, and you should have DNA samples taken to check for hereditary diseases. On the other hand, if you're buying a top showjumper, you should arrange for a complete set of X-rays of its legs and neck, but you need not worry about its fertility.

A blood test may also be required to show whether drugs have been used to mask lameness in a competition horse or racehorse. In this case, a microchip is obligatory and the sample should be taken as prescribed by the International Federation for Equestrian Sports or the racing authority to determine forbidden substances.

In contrast to these horses, an elderly pony with lumpy legs but a good temperament may be an ideal lead-rein pony for a beginner, even if it needs chronic pain medication. Such a horse would obviously cost far less than a showjumper, so your risk of losing money is far lower, and a detailed examination with full X-rays would not really be necessary.

Understanding the details

The veterinarian must not only record the clinical findings, but explain their significance to buyer and seller. The former in particular will want to understand the long-term outcome of the findings.

Veterinary textbooks describe the ideal anatomy of a horse and roughly classify abnormalities as 'acute' or 'chronic', and 'minor' or 'major', but their prognosis depends on treatment and management.

For instance, a small cut on a fetlock could make a horse lame, but if the wound is cleaned and treated with antibiotics, the horse will probably be sound in a week or two.

At the time of vetting the lame horse, however, the vet cannot guarantee soundness, as there is no way of knowing whether the animal will be treated correctly, and the cause of lameness may not be entirely apparent at the time of vetting.

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