



When Buying a Horse: 5 First-Timer Tips, Issue 34


by John Lyons Certified Trainer Keith Hosman

If you're buying a horse, especially if it's to be your first, here are five tips that'll save you (and your family and your local horse trainer) plenty of headaches in the coming years. It's far from a complete rundown and you are advised to seek further guidance from your trainer, your vet – and any experienced horseman you can corner before putting any money down (or “accepting” in the case of a free or rescued horse). Note that the following may read like a list of things “not to do,” but you'd be amazed how many emails I receive (nearly on a daily basis) from folks who “just seemed to have acquired a couple of horses”... and are now in over their heads, sending emails begging for help because they can't afford a professional trainer. I'm going to be blunt in the coming paragraphs and I do so as a service to your pocket book and family. Horses are not toys, nor are they machines that can be tuned using objective measurements out of some book then stored away till the next season.

Owning a horse is a full time commitment; it's 24/7, 365 days a year – for years. It means boarding bills and feed bills and vet bills and farrier bills. (And always at the worst times.) It means finding someone to care for it or turn it out when you go on vacation or work long hours. It means being solely responsible for an animal that has feelings and learns both good and very dangerous habits. It means putting compassion in its place and making hard choices – and, to that end, here's a little dose of reality: While owning a horse has its rewards, a horse is an animal that could kick you in the head and sleep soundly tonight. Their behavior evolves every moment of every day and if you can't afford occasional training – or if you're not capable of keeping the discipline yourself, let alone actually doing minimalist training, don't get a horse. Yes, I'm talking to you. Lease one, borrow one, rent one, forget 'em entirely – but don't buy one.


Okay, Tip Number One... No, let's call this “Hard and Fast Rule Number One.” If you are an inexperienced horseman, do not, not ever, buy a green horse

figuring the “two of you can learn together.” A horse is not a pair of pants that you'll “grow into.” In the time it takes you to learn the simple basics, you will have turned your horse into a biting, pushy, kicking, bucking monster – and that's the only training you'll succeed in doing. This goes doubly for any horse you



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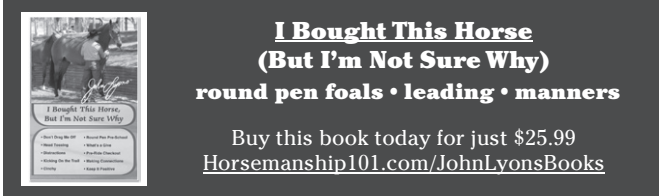
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might buy for your kids. I've actually received emails from people who have picked up a green, 1- or 2-year-old horse (read: “zero training”) with every intention of putting their own children on the backs of these animals. Invariably, these messages end with “PS: My kids don't know how to ride yet.” Is this not a living example of “survival of the fittest?” How is this any different than turning to little Johnny and saying “Mommy picked up a live grenade for you to play with?” I'll bottom line it for you: It's mathematically impossible for your horse to get the amount of training it needs in time for your kids (having themselves matured whilst receiving a commensurate amount of training) to ever, ever, EVER ride that horse.

If you are not an experienced horseman - and have no plans to work with a pro trainer – then begin by leasing or borrowing a friend's horse. Alternatively, you can take lessons with an eye towards purchase. You may very well not buy the lesson horse, of course – but ride enough and you'll start to discern traits that you find appealing. Do you like slow and steady or zippy and alert? Tall? Short? Trained for a particular

“Horses are not machines that can be tuned using objective measurements out of a book.”



event or a good solid trail horse? Pushbutton or not-so-pushbutton? This holds true for all sorts of training and levels: Even when training at an upper, more advanced level, the trainer you're working with will doubtless have horses you can ride (try out) in order to get a feel for what's right for you.

Inexperienced horsemen should ride or buy experienced horses, preferably ones that can... well... correct your mistakes. They tend to be a bit duller (opportunistic?), sure, but ignoring an incorrect or reckless cue from you might prove a valuable tool when you're first learning. For instance, were you to spot something on the trail and jerk up your reins ready to make a run for it, the older horse will simply plod on, ignoring your nervousness, (think Sir John Gielgud's character in "Arthur"). Try that with a young horse and he'll obligingly scoot to the next county – but he may very well buck or rear you off first. Another example: Maybe you're a cutter or reiner. You might benefit from the more mature horse with the "Let me handle this, New Guy" sorta attitude. Simply put, you may need a horse that'll override you in the heat of the moment and cut the calf "you really mean" or do a flying lead despite your confusing signals.

To put a finer point on this, let's say you wanted to pick up your left lead. With an older horse you'd drop your right leg back, kiss and bang, you're loping. You'd do that several thousand times and eventually begin to feel what feels right (seconds before "take off") and what feels wrong. Alternatively, how would a green horse know you wanted a left lead when you don't even know how to set him up for it? (That is, if he ignores a cue, how do you set him up or motivate him to oblige?) Or how about a flying lead change? Your trainer could tell you do x, y and z to make your request on an experienced horse and you'd get your change. But what would you do if your horse ignored your cues? He doesn't know his "x" from his "z" and you barely know the cues yourself, let alone how to

enforce them. He'd quickly start ignoring your lame requests and soon you'd have a horse that tunes you out altogether. Start with an experienced horse, learn from him, trade him in years later when you're ready for a zippier model.

A note about purchasing school horses: I worked for years at a riding school back in the day and saw many riders/lesson-takers purchase a horse they'd grown fond of. Now, in the case of the school where I worked, I can tell you that the lady who owned the place took diligent, quality care of her horses. She had to; her very livelihood depended on the horses staying healthy so that they could be sent out for lessons. No horse, no money. But, having said that, I'll proffer a few caveats about lesson horses: They tend to be older horses and, yes, this usually spells "calmer" because by and large, they've "been there done that" to the point that virtually nothing scares them. But... with that experience comes certain trade-offs. Older horses can have leg issues. Older horses by definition only have x-amount of good years in them. Older horses know lots and lots of tricks to avoid being saddled, blanketed or otherwise worked and can be cranky SOBs. Know these things and factor them in. (And, as with any purchase, but especially in this case, get a vet check that includes leg x-rays.)

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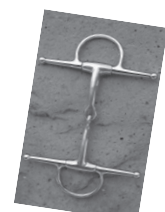


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"You might benefit from a more mature horse with a 'Let me handle this, New Guy' attitude."

Tip Number Two: You get what you pay for (and sometimes what you don't). If your Uncle Joe shuffles off his mortal coil and leaves you his 52" Sony flat screen, then you got a free TV. If Uncle Joe leaves you those two pretty fillies in his backyard, the two paints with no training that nobody can touch... and "you've always wanted a horse but don't know the first thing about horses..." then he's actually left you a pile of professional horse training bills if you're lucky, hospital bills if you're not. Unlike the TV that uses up only electricity, those horses are far from free. There's hoof trimming and inoculations and bags of feed... and you certainly can't afford to skip the training and allow them to de-evolve into expensive, dangerous lawn ornaments that your farrier can't get near nor can your vet.

Bloodlines and age aside, expect to pay more for the horse that's proven himself capable of reliably carrying a beginner or child. School horses are pricey because they've shown that they can pack a newbie around in circles in relative safety and that means money in the bank. Nobody's gonna sell a proven school horse till they've done the math: "How many years of making me money has Flicka got left in her?" up against "What's the cost of breaking in a new school horse?" Sure, logic says "How can that horse be so darned expensive with average bloodlines and no real training?" – but truly dependable horses are tough to find. Great horses for green riders or kids are even tougher to find. A young horse with a truly gentle, amenable mind on it (the equine equivalent of the indefatigable, happy-go-lucky golden retriever) – is a rare creature indeed. You'll find them, priced accordingly.

Tip Number Three: Don't go it alone. You'll do something dumb like buying a horse because "you connected the first time you saw him." Rubbish. Work with a reputable trainer to find your horse. Warning: While most trainers are upstanding individuals who love their kids and hardly ever beat their wives, there are some bad apples out there with all the scruples of your typical lobbyist or trial lawyer. How did the phrase "horse trader" get its negative connotation, after all? Do your homework, get references for the guy and check those references out. When you've got somebody you can trust, see if he can't make a match.

Books Recommended for:

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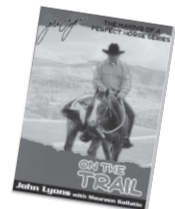


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"Expect to pay more for the horse that's capable of reliably carrying a beginner or child."

Be honest with him about your level of expertise, wallet size and plans. Be careful of anybody who steers you toward “too much horse,” (like the guy who tried to sell me a movie stunt horse back when I was still learning to stay on). Mark the dog down as “shyster” in your address book and start over.

I would suggest that you make sure that you can afford to have a good trainer work with the two of you for a good six months after taking possession. When the trainer gets the two of you meshed, he can slowly wean you off his services – but remember that it gets progressively more expensive to fix “the bad things” your horse picks up from you, the new horse owner.

Note: Don't turn a blind eye to real deals. Though rare, they do exist. Be willing to look at horses priced below what you had expected to pay. If you're thinking ten grand and turn your nose up to a horse selling for two, you'll get a call tomorrow for that very same horse in disguise now offered at ten.

Tip Number Four: Don't trust anybody. There are some shady characters out there looking to unload a lousy horse on some untrusting soul and you need to be super careful throughout the entire purchase/scouting process. The owner may very well have been suckered herself. Be vigilant, lest you fall into that same trap. That sweet little lady who says her grand kids ride Daisy every weekend with reckless abandon and nary a fall may be so desperate to unload Daisy-the-ex-rodeo-horse that she's lying through her teeth. She might have drugged the horse or exercised it nearly to death shortly before your arrival. Yes, that sweet little old lady. (This is another reason you need the help of an experienced horse trainer/trader. He knows the pitfalls and is more than worth his ten percent commission.) One thing you might consider is showing up sans notice to take your trial ride (better, “rides” plural). Also: When somebody says “My horse can be ridden.” You respond with “Please show me.” Don't get on the horse until somebody else has ridden it. This is John Lyons 101, a simple rule that you need to follow. Finally, never put money down till the vet has looked the horse over – and not without a written agreement that says you can bring it back within x-days for a full refund and for any darn reason under the sun, assuming it's still healthy, of course.

How To Make Horse Training (More) Affordable

by John Lyons Certified Trainer Keith Hosman

“Got a horse that needs training but you can't afford it and you'd never consider giving away so much potential? The horse you saved from the packer or bred yourself or adopted at the BLM? He loves you and you love him and he's got a really cool name. Yet you're getting the creeping feeling that you're in over your head. Flicka seems to be getting more dangerous daily and you're beginning to believe that he lies awake at night thinking of ways to torment you. But, darn it, he's got potential! Things could be so good! Flicka's bred to death; he's “out of Texas by Boxcar.” He's a free spirit, gorgeous and happy. Sure, he gets grumpy when asked to do... anything... but if you could just figure out how to unlock all that potential...

And what's really making you nuts is that everybody at the barn has an opinion. “Use a stronger bit, use a leverage bit, pitch the bit and ride with a hackamore.” You'd tell them to stick their advice – but you just got dumped again and you're in no position to argue.

Unfortunately, horses get worse in these situations. They don't grow out of it like human teens (usually) do.

Your horse is going from bad to worse. If things keep progressing at this pace, you'll get kicked in the head this time tomorrow. But what to do? Professionals cost hundreds per month. Quick calculations show that it'd take somewhere around eighty-bazillion dollars to build your baby into the horse of your dreams, the one who meets you at the gate, leads beautifully and rides like a Cadillac....”

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“There are some shady characters out there looking to unload a lousy horse on you.”

Tip Number Five: Seriously consider the horse's background. Case in point, if you're a novice and no trainer, stay far, far away from those track rescue horses. I mean it. If I had a buck for every rescued runner that's now virtually retired to pasture simply because nobody's brave enough to ride it, I'd have a bunch of money, let me tell ya. I promise you that unless you spend a bloody fortune on a trainer, you'll not spend ten minutes aboard that horse, charging through the surf, feeling the wind in your hair, bonding and channeling Elizabeth Taylor in "National Velvet." And, for goodness sake, stay away from the BLM wild-crazed mustangs. You may save a few bucks – and you might even get lucky and find a true diamond in the rough – but by and large, they're not worth the aggravation. Don't get me started. Nuff said.

Finally, I'll ramble through a few more caveats: 1) As previously stated, remember to stay clear of any horse that's ever appeared in a movie and to be careful of school horses that might be chronically lame/arthritis. 2) While geldings are a touch more readily trained, you might consider a mare for one specific reason: You can still breed it should it come up forever lame. The gelding you'd be stuck with. 3) The more times a horse has been shown, the more "burnt" he may very well have become. If you're considering an older show jumper, barrel runner, or eventer, for instance, remember that he may know more tricks than you and he might prove a challenge to re-school. Discuss any reservations with your trainer. 4) Those nasty habits ("He just bucks once in awhile") you see before you buy the horse only get worse after you own the horse unless you have a good, solid gameplan to fix them. 5) Consider any costs that might be associated with your horse if it's older and needs a constant supply of pain-killing drugs, feeds or special shoeing. Corrective shoeing, for instance, can run you hundreds (yes, hundreds) of dollars every six or so weeks. Factor accordingly.

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Your Foal: Essential Training

by John Lyons Certified Trainer Keith Hosman

An excerpt from Day 1 of 5:

"Weanlings are like hot house flowers. There's only so much you can do with them while you're waiting for them to grow and blossom into something you can ride or ask to pull a cart. You feed them; you water them; you show them off. Still, potted plants don't grow progressively more dangerous with each passing day as can the typical colt beginning to feel his oats. Few florists are done in annually by your average petunia, yet growing your horse into a safe and obliging member of the family requires buckets of consistent training from you, the owner. Loving horse owners are done in frequently by well-placed kicks; they lose fingers to "playful nips" and have their toes stepped on all too often. For safety's sake – and to ensure his value in future years as a quality "riding horse," there are certain training milestones that must be met as we wait for them to grow into "something we can use." If you could simply throw the horse into a pasture and come back two years later with a saddle, you could chuck this book – but that's not really possible. Above the simple fact that we'd like to pet our baby and hang out with him there are other considerations. Between now and your foal's first saddling, he's got to learn to stand for the vet, to be haltered, to respect our space, to be led from here to there – the list goes on. Your job then, is to shepherd your foal for the next couple of years. You'll steer negative behavior into something positive, you'll quash poor habits, you'll set boundaries for the life of your horse...."

Excerpted from "Your Foal: Essential Training," a 5-day course from Lyons Trainer Keith Hosman. Get the full course at Horsemanship101.com/Courses.

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