

Is shopping at the racetrack the right avenue for you?

Part Two

by Sue Smith

I dread clothes shopping, preferring to scrub toilets over trying on formal wear. I'm that person who immediately becomes disoriented when I walk in a store, paralyzed by options and disgusted by the thought of the 360 degree mirror that awaits me in the dressing room. I may find a color I like, but the style doesn't fit my body type or I try on a dress that would work perfectly for a friend, but it shows my farmer's tan. There are dresses that are stunning on the rack but not suitable for my event. And when I finally find something I like, it's rarely in my price range. Inevitably I become impatient, decide there's no perfect dress and bring home something that is sort of functional but I don't really love.

While I'm sure most of you are more cultured in dress shopping than I am, I see a similar process when I watch some people horse shop. You've made this long trip to the racetrack; a friend just brought home another amazing prospect and has already resold him for a profit. She assures you there will be a huge selection of horses and you'll find a great deal. Then you arrive. The environment is new, exciting and often intimidating. You had your heart set on one horse from his CANTER Ad, then you look at him and while he has some good points, you don't connect; maybe you don't like how he moves or how he acts in his stall. You move on to the next, but you're concerned about his soundness. The next is the wrong height, etc. Trainers see you struggling and direct you to another horse and then another, ones you never would have considered on your own. You'll see horses above and below your price range, then you begin to doubt yourself. Everyone else finds nice horses at the track, why can't you find one that fits? The next thing you know you're buying a horse that doesn't meet any of your requirements.

Our first installment of this article series focused on the research you should do before deciding whether or not to pursue riding prospects at the racetrack. Part two follows the same thread in terms of how to narrow your search, arriving at the track with a purpose and a plan of attack for vetting. We'll also try to help translate some typical race chatter that will help you understand the horse's background.

4. Do you have a clear idea of what you are shopping for? Is it a realistic goal?
 - a. Our most popular "Horse Wanted" request is a big, sound, clean legged, 17 hand grey gelding without any blemishes, who raced (but only lightly), who will jump 3'6", save small children from burning buildings and is priced under \$500. Sorry

folks, you are setting yourself up for disappointment, rethink what is truly important to you.

- b. Make a list of your priorities – age, sex, cost, height, style of movement, injuries or conformation issues you will accept, temperament, etc... write these traits down in order of importance and read the list before and after you look at each prospect. Remind yourself of what you are searching for and try not to be swept away by emotion. Perhaps your budget is written in stone, but size or sex can be negotiable; make the right compromises and only make compromises you can live with long-term.
- c. I would also ask that riders be honest about what they intend to do with their new horse and select a horse that matches their goals. There is a large segment of horses exiting the racetrack who may be suitable for a number of careers but perhaps do not have completely clean x-rays or they have an injury which may require maintenance in the future. If you are shopping for a personal horse ask yourself if this is the type of horse you might enjoy in your barn? The answer will be different for each of us but some of these “hard-knocking” horses are one in a million.
- d. If you do not find a horse on your first horse shopping trip, don't settle on a horse that does not meet your criteria. I assure you there is no shortage of horses in need of quality homes!



5. Are you asking the right questions?

- e. Racing and Sport Horse communities have many similarities, but they do have different perspectives on some issues. Soundness may be one of the most glaring deviations that we face when making a purchase. “Sound” is a vague term; most likely your definition of “sound” and a race trainer’s definition of “sound” will be two different concepts, be sure to clarify. Instead of asking, “Is this horse sound?” Ask, “Has this horse ever had any injuries?” “Does this horse

have any known bone chips, fractures or bows?” “Do you think this horse will x-ray clean?” “How does he come back after a race?” Those are specific questions that will help you gather information to determine whether this horse will meet your needs.

- f. Learn the lingo. If a trainer says, “He has a knee” he’s not trying to impress you with his understanding of anatomy; he’s saying that sometimes the knee bothers the horse. Your question should be, “Have you x-rayed it?” “What do you think is going on?” Perhaps it was a temporary soreness, but if clean x-rays are important to you we highly recommend you investigate.

6. Have you budgeted for a PPE?

- g. Please do a pre-purchase exam... PLEASE. While it may seem illogical to potentially spend more on vetting expenses than on your purchase price, view the combined cost as your total purchase price and accept it as part of the process. It is money well spent and almost always future money saved.



- h. One of the most common reasons a track horse does not work out relates to old injuries! Fresh injuries are much easier to detect and regardless of whether an old injury impacts the horse’s ability, if you are considering a horse for high end resale, you understand that the x-rays must be clean for the highest return on investment. Best to find out today whether a horse will pass a pre-purchase exam, not after years of training expenses.
- i. Let’s look at how race horses are acquired to help understand why vetting a horse is important. Horses may be purchased at auction or through private sales but the majority, particularly those nearing the end of their careers, are acquired through claiming races. Simply put, all horses entered in claiming races are “for sale” at a predetermined price (i.e. all horses in a \$5000 Claiming race may be purchased for \$5000). They are not going to be vetted before being claimed; at

the end of the race the new trainer will be handed the horse and if the two trainers are on good terms they may talk briefly about some concerns the horse has, but otherwise, the horse will be purchased with absolutely no prior history. This easily happens several times over the course of that horse's career.

- j. He may race consistently, have no known issues when he's retired and it isn't until much later, even years later, when an old injury is discovered. By exchanging hands several times during a career, the trainer who retires a horse may not have any the slightest bit of info regarding the horse's early years.
- k. If you find a horse you are interested in, carefully study and feel the horse's legs. Are there any asymmetries? If one ankle is larger than the other, you may want to consider x-rays. If you feel a bump or a fluid pocket on a knee, you may want to consider x-rays. If you plan on being a serious Eventer, you may want to scope your horse before purchase. Horses aren't just a financial investment, they are your heart and soul so it is always best to make decisions about a future partner with as much information that you can muster.

Racing is a very demanding sport and while we find that the majority of OTTBs can go on to have very productive secondary careers, we assure you that not every horse exiting the backside is going to be a Rolex prospect or that he will have clean x-rays. Be smart about shopping; do your research, be selective, get professional help and think through your purchase. I assure you buyer's remorse over a dress is much easier to resolve than buyer's remorse on a living, breathing soul.