

## Is shopping at the racetrack the right avenue for you?

*by Sue Smith*

Without fail, every Saturday when I'm on my way to the racetrack there is that moment when the track comes into view, I can see the horses training... and my heart flutters. The allure of the racetrack can draw you in, but the question arises, "Is this the right environment for you to be horse shopping?"

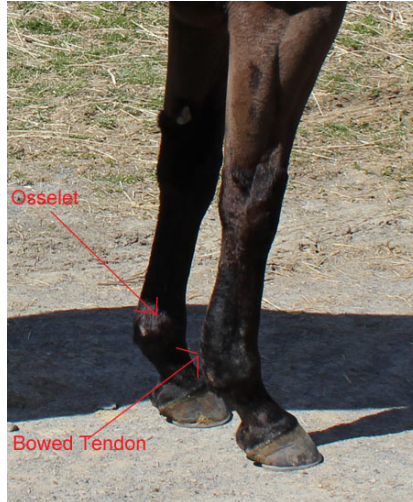
Making a purchase directly off the track is tricky. You may receive limited history about the horse, you will not be able to ride or see him be lunged before purchase and instead may have to make a decision based on watching a horse walk and jog down an uneven horse path. A few moments to evaluate the horse's personality, conformation and movement – this is not for the faint of heart!

It's hard not to get caught up in the beauty of a fit, well-muscled runner or the "deal of a century" approach to horse shopping, but the challenge is not to fall for the emotional aspects and to evaluate the horse in front of you, determining whether he'll be the horse you need today or want in the future. Here is a list of questions that we hope may help you decide whether shopping at the race track is the right fit for you and if it is, how to make a well-informed decision:



1. What is your experience and comfort level with off track Thoroughbreds (OTTBs) and "green" horses?
  - a. Do you enjoy the process of retraining? Do you have the time to be dedicated to retraining? Can you safely navigate through an evaluation of a horse who has an unknown history? If not, do you work with someone who does and can help you fill in any gaps you may come across? If you've never ridden a TB or a green horse, track horses may not be a good fit for you at this time. There are always exceptions to the rules and a lot of these horses have fabulous minds, but generally speaking a horse directly off the racetrack is not suitable for beginner riders and they may not even feel "broke" compared to most sport or pleasure horses you've ridden.
2. Do you have a safe setup for an OTTB and a safe area to ride and train?

- a. Depending on each individual horse's history, your new OTTB may have not been turned out in pasture since he started his training as a two year old. He will be fit, on the muscle and busting at the seams; as fun as it may seem to allow him the freedom to gallop as fast as his legs can carry him... this is not a good idea! Please start your horse's turnout in a small paddock with safe, solid fencing so he gets his squeals out gradually. Work up to more grass time (your horse may not have had grass in his diet while at the racetrack and should be introduced slowly) in larger areas, over time. Also be cautious introducing him into your existing herd, safety is your number one objective as no one enjoys unexpected vet bills. Make the transition a low key experience.
  - b. Take the same approach to riding. It's ideal to start your OTTB in a secure area like a fenced arena or round pen. Use a methodical, low key approach just as you did with turnout. Keep both horse and rider calm and confident; their racing careers are over, training isn't a speed contest!
3. Are you familiar with soundness and conformation issues?
- a. Read, study, observe! You want to know how to find a steal at the racetrack??? Understand what you are looking at. Often you'll see horses at the racetrack move stinky, up and down like a sewing machine; it's your job to gauge by how they are built whether this is a temporary issue or whether this horse might permanently move like a camel. There are numerous books written regarding these topics, take the time to read them. Personally, I recommend anything by Dr. Deb Bennett, but the internet is full of free resources, check them out.
  - b. Study common lameness in ex-racehorses. Become familiar with these issues so you can identify the ones that are visual on inspection, comprehend the risks involved with each, the available treatments and costs, as well as basic prognoses. Most commonly you may come across bucked shins, "bowed" tendons or suspensory injuries, osselets, bone chips, slab fractures and condylar fractures. Know before you go to the racetrack whether any of these issues are deal breakers for you or which severity of the above is suitable for your use. While there is no replacement for the expertise of a vet, be informed before you go so you can have an educated opinion on your purchase and so you can avoid the expense of vetting a horse which blatantly has one of the issues on your "deal breaker" list.



Take your time in selecting a horse, whether on the track or off the track, and make an educated decision. Perhaps dedicate one hour each night this week to research; pick a new topic every night and become that much more of a horseman.

Stayed tuned for our next segment which will focus on the pre-purchase exam, initial post-track training and your “dream horse” shopping list.