

The Pre-purchase Exam

When buying that “perfect horse”, numerous factors need to be considered. In addition to breed, conformation, discipline, level of training, and so forth; the health and soundness of the prospective purchase must be considered. While a good place to start is with questioning the seller about such matters, the pre-purchase exam is the ideal way to address this issue.

In discussing the pre-purchase exam, let’s first discuss what it is NOT. The pre-purchase exam is not a veterinary visit that “passes or fails” the horse, nor is it a veterinary visit that tells you whether you should buy a particular animal or not. The exam does not assess level of training or suitability for the rider. It is also not a guarantee that the horse will not develop health or lameness problems after the purchase.

What the pre-purchase exam IS intended to be is a tool for the prospective buyer to make an informed decision about purchasing a horse by providing as much information about the current health status of the horse as possible. With this knowledge, the buyer can decide if the areas of imperfect health are minor enough to be overshadowed by the positive attributes this horse possesses.

When pursuing a pre-purchase examination for a potential purchase, the first step is selecting a veterinarian. Generally, it is not recommended to use the services of the regular barn veterinarian, as this may be seen as a conflict of interest. One must remember that the veterinarian is acting as an agent on behalf of the buyer, and thus should only be considering the buyer’s need for information. The regular barn veterinarian should not be put in this position of needing to transfer their professional service away from their regular client. The veterinarian should be familiar with the discipline the horse is intended for, as well as being experienced in all aspects of the pre-purchase exam. He (or she) should be able to take quality radiographs and interpret them, and be willing to forward them on to an expert in the field if questions arise.

If purchasing a horse far from home, you may seek a referral from the potential seller. You may also seek a referral from several other veterinary sources. Your own veterinarian may be able to direct you to a veterinarian in that area. Or you can seek information via the Bayer sponsored website: getadvm.com. This website will direct you to AAEP (American Association of Equine Practitioners) members in the area of the country you specify.

Once you’ve selected a veterinarian, he will discuss with you the intended use of the horse, any concerns you have about the animal’s health or soundness, and how in-depth you wish the exam to be. An exam can be as brief or in-depth as the buyer wishes, but one must remember that the more in-depth the exam,

the more information you will receive to aid in your purchasing decision. A minimal pre-purchase exam should consist of a thorough physical exam, use of hoof testers to examine the feet, flexion tests performed on all four limbs, and follow-up testing to further detail any abnormalities noted on the initial exam. If you are unable to be present during the exam, you should provide phone numbers where you can be reached during the examination so the veterinarian can discuss his findings and make recommendations for any further diagnostics needed.

Some potential purchasers request that radiographs be taken. Frequently if a horseperson has had previous experience with a structure or joint, they will request radiographs of that area on future purchases. This isn't necessarily a sound way of thinking, but may provide the buyer with some peace of mind that they aren't asking for a repetition of previous problems.

A more rational approach is to radiograph those areas that either are expected to receive considerable abuse based on the horse's intended use or those areas found to be "problem areas" on the initial exam. For example, a horse that is sensitive on hoof testing exam over the bars of the front feet may benefit from radiographs of the front feet and navicular bones. The horse that shows lameness on flexion test of the hock may benefit from x-raying the hock. The hunter or jumper is expected to place excess stress on the front limbs, so radiographing the knees and fetlocks of the front limbs may be rational.

However, please remember that x-rays aren't the answer to finding all problems. It's important to remember to consider all parts of the examination when deciding if findings are significant. Radiographic changes without supporting physical exam findings may have minimal impact on the horse's future as an athlete. For example, many horses have significant radiographic changes of the navicular bones, but without supporting evidence (i.e. – pain with use of hoof testers that can be "block" out with the appropriate nerve block), there is no basis for a diagnosis of navicular syndrome.

Once the examination and any additional diagnostics are completed, the veterinarian should discuss in detail with the potential purchaser all information gathered and present that information to the purchaser in either written or verbal form. The buyer can then use that information in making their purchasing decision. The potential purchaser also needs to decide if the information gathered during the pre-purchase exam is to be shared with the seller. Remember, the veterinarian is acting as the agent of the potential purchaser, and legally the seller only has the right to the information gathered if the purchaser gives their permission. Likewise however, the horse is still the property of the seller, so any invasive procedures such as nerve blocks, injections, or tranquilization can only be done after receiving the permission of the seller or his agent.

Properly done, the pre-purchase examination can be a valuable tool in making the decision to purchase a horse. The purchase of an equine athlete is neither easy or inexpensive, so it makes sense to be "armed" with as much information as possible when making that important decision.