

Good Horses and Great Matches

By Lynn Acton

My daughter and I were both schooling someone else's horses, Sarah on a high-strung Thoroughbred mare, me on a stubborn Quarter Horse gelding. Proud of her mount's calm focus, Sarah insisted I try the mare so I could fully appreciate what she'd accomplished. Equally pleased with how cheerfully the gelding was moving forward, I agreed to swap horses. Ten minutes later, as the mare became increasingly speedy, and I increasingly nervous, I heard a wail. "Mom! This horse is scaring me!"

I looked around to see the QH standing center ring, legs braced, expression mutinous. "How can he be scaring you?" I asked, mystified. "He's not doing anything."

"That's just it," Sarah pointed out. "He's not listening to me at all!"

We swapped horses again, and all four of us heaved a sigh of relief. Within minutes both horses were calmly and diligently back to work. There was nothing wrong with either horse *with a compatible rider*.

We tend to evaluate horses based on tangible characteristics: height, conformation, color, age, breed, pedigree, gaits, health, soundness, or training. While any of these might be important, none guarantee that a specific horse and rider will get along with each other. The traits that make for happy relationships are more elusive and more crucial. This is true even if you don't ride. Riding is not required to bond with a horse or to become an excellent horse handler. One of the finest horsemen I ever knew did not ride, but every horse in his care trusted him absolutely. Just substitute "handler" for "rider" as you read on.

Riding or handling a horse involves relating to him, however briefly. Horses, like people, relate best to individuals with compatible personalities. Anxious horses need calm, reassuring riders. High energy horses work best for people who keep them busy and focused. Challenging horses require experienced, confident people. Horses who don't care about relating to people might be satisfactory for those interested mainly in athletic prowess or other physical features, but a social horse is more gratifying for people who want to develop a close bond. Yvonne Barteau explores horse personalities in her book, "Ride the Right Horse: Understanding the Core Equine Personalities & How to Work with Them".

Matching skill levels of horse and rider is also critical. There is a time honored tradition that novice riders should learn from experienced horses, while green horses need experienced riders to teach them. That's as true today as it was 2,300 years ago when Xenophon explained it in "The Art of

Horsemanship”. There are instructors who encourage riders to buy horses beyond their confidence level, and trainers who assure novices that they can train their own horses. While this is financially rewarding for the person whose on-going assistance is required, it is rarely rewarding for horse or rider who are frequently confused, frustrated, and unsafe. The best challenge for a novice is to get a reliable, trained horse, and learn the cues and skills the horse already knows.

Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of a happy match is a common interest. Jerry and Sapphire agree that trail rides are the best, ring work is tolerable occasionally, and shows are out of the question. Sapphire’s previous owner had her heart set on showing in Western Pleasure. When she realized that she and Sapphire would forever be at cross purposes, she found Sapphire a new home and career. My sister loves dressage; her Appaloosa-warmblood does not. After many battles they forged a compromise: Sammie puts honest effort into dressage, which my sister intersperses with the jumping and trail riding Sammie loves.

When people reminisce about special horses they’ve known over the years, they rarely mention a horse’s appearance. The memorable qualities are intelligence, reliability, sense of humor, courage. “He was fun to ride,” or “She took care of me.” Sometimes chance brings us those horses with whom we feel a special connection, but we can tip the odds in our favor.

1. Take every safe opportunity to ride and handle different horses. Learning to adjust is part of good horsemanship, but it’s also useful to recognize which horses we enjoy and relate to best. I am more adaptable now than when my daughter and I schooled horses together, but I still love the stubborn characters, and Sarah still finds them exasperating.

2. If you plan to ride the horse, test ride before you buy. If you can’t walk, trot, steer, and stop independently, *not* following another horse or circling in a round pen, take lessons until you can. If you plan to trail ride, take the horse on a trail. A test ride allows you to make sure you and the horse “click”, that you feel safe with his training level *and behavior*. If not, keep looking. Ride the horse as many times as necessary. A trial period is ideal. When we ride horses who make us nervous, our riding does not improve; it regresses.

3. Remember that quality depends on the attributes that are important to *us*. Not someone else. My husband’s dream horse was someone else’s “night-mare”. The best horse for my cousin’s 7 year old son was a kind, 32-year old mare their neighbors had deemed “useless”. And a pedigree is a genealogy chart, not a guarantee. As a friend likes to say, “You don’t ride the papers.” Always get a pre-purchase vet check; it saves heartache.

4. Respect that horses don't get to choose their owners, and don't have to share our goals. For a good partnership, *we* are the ones who must adapt.

The world is full of good horses. When the right horse and the right human get together, each brings out the best in the other.