TRAINING *with*

BUYING YOUR 'life-time' HORSE

THE INTELLIGENT WAY

By Kelly Marks

While well-known performance sires can look attractive on your horse's passport, that kind of breeding might not produce a happy hacker content to amble around the lanes

> "The two worse things that can happen are: the owner becomes too frightened to ride the horse because of behaviour issues and/ or the horse turns out to be unsound."

PLEASE DON'T THINK THIS ARTICLE IS PUTTING DOWN THE VERY PEOPLE WHO HAVE COME TO IH BECAUSE THEY HAVE HAD HORSE PROBLEMS; OR THAT IT IS SUGGESTING WE SHOULD ALL IGNORE THOSE 'LESS THAN PERFECT' HORSES AND AIM FOR JUST A SELECT FEW.

It's written, as was Tough Choices on pages 16 and 17, because, now more than ever, we receive so many sad emails about the dream of horse ownership turning into a nightmare. It is remarkably easy to acquire a horse – but the responsibility mustn't be underestimated.

This article is not a comprehensive guide to buying a horse – just some points for you to think on.

There's an old saying that 'the way to buy a good horse is to buy a lot of bad horses'; suggesting, it seems, that you'll learn from experience and also that buying a good horse is, to a certain extent, a numbers game.

Even the most experienced horse buyers in the world (if they're honest) would concede there is at least a certain amount of chance involved – as in life.

Those of you who have read Monty Roberts' book *The Horses in my Life* will know that Monty has bought an extraordinary amount of horses to date, and a large percentage have turned out to be very talented horses. Even Monty, however, wouldn't claim 100% success.

When you're buying horses for business or for competition, it's reasonable to accept that not every horse is going to be a star. In the case of buying horses for business or competition, it's straightforward to measure exactly what you mean by 'success'.

Did the horse sell at a profit or make money as a stallion or win major competitions? If the answer is a 'yes' then we can safely say he was a success.

For the rest of us, though, the definition of a successful buy or acquisition is much harder to define. Sometimes, perhaps partly to protect our ego, we change the goal posts.

Many owners would be extremely insulted if you suggested that the horse which cost them £4,000 in vet's bills alone and is still unsuitable to be ridden, even though that was what he was bought for, was a less-than successful purchase. The indignant answer would be "It was definitely fate that brought us together! He's taught me so much and I love him!"

If you are already in this position, I am not suggesting you should alter your admirably positive attitude. This is an article for people who are considering acquiring a horse and before you have the horse is the time to think very carefully about what are your future dreams – and future nightmares.

Afterwards is too late and could mean you one day have to face 'Tough Choices'; these are much less fun than that exciting new horse arriving.

Some IH tips for an amateur buying that 'lifetime' horse

For the general buyer who is buying a horse to ride I would suggest the two worse things that can happen are: the owner becomes too frightened to ride the horse because of behaviour issues and/or the horse turns out to be unsound and can't be ridden. Before you buy, think very carefully about the consequences of this happening to you.

Have you got an affordable back up plan of professional riders and veterinary cover if things start to go wrong? Have you got a strategy to minimise the chance of these things happening to you – even if the chance can't be eliminated entirely? >>

BUYING YOUR 'life-time' HORSE
THE INTELLIGENT WAY

> "Find a vet you can trust to do the vetting and be there at the time it is being done."

Buying youngsters has pros and cons: make sure you speak to the breeder and, if possible, find out more about the mare and why she has been bred from before taking the plunge

What's the best age to buy your 'lifetime' horse?

It can seem such a great idea to buy a young horse 'with all that potential' and 'never having been ruined by someone else'. However, the reality is that there are openings for so many physical and emotional (the equivalent of the 'teenage years') challenges with a horse between the time you start them to around seven years old.

If buying this horse is your ONE chance to get it right, I would suggest choosing a horse of seven years or older, by which time his character is established and disastrous genetic physical issues will most likely have revealed themselves. It often becomes harder to sell horses once they are eight years and older and yet, at that age, they are actually coming into the prime of their life.

Don't expect to find a completely perfect horse. Just be sure his imperfections are such you will be able to live with them.

If you're thinking of taking on an ex-racehorse, be honest with yourself about whether it will be suitable for your needs and abilities

Nature vs nurture

One of the IH sayings is 'set yourself up for success'. Apart from a full and proper trial of the horse, in an ideal world we'd also have details of the horse's breeding.

There are fascinating studies on human identical twins separated at birth that show the relevance of genetics (if you ever doubted it). If you want 'the one' to love for life, then try and find a horse that's been bred for soundness along with a kind, willing temperament – that way, you'll be stacking the odds in your favour.

The word 'trainability' has recently come into fashion; when we own or train a horse the IH way, we always look at ourselves first when things aren't going to plan. This is a good attitude to have; however, it remains a fact that some horses are always going to be genetically 'trickier' than others.

I am well aware that many horses don't come with any breeding information (neither Pie nor Corky did). However, if you want to give yourself the advantage of the professional horse people (and why should they have all the 'luck'?) you need to find out why the mare was used for breeding.

Was it because she was such a delight and thought bound to breed a beautiful foal?
Or because she was unsound and bad tempered and they didn't know what else to do with her?

While you may be thrilled to hear the horse you are interested in has a champion racehorse sire or had bred some great showjumpers, if you are not planning to race or showjump, think carefully if this breeding is a plus point or a minus for what you want to do. If your only ambition is to ride at weekends and go on some fun rides, a horse bred to be a great athlete may be the worst idea.

The advantages of buying a seven year old or over is the genetic tendencies are likely to have revealed themselves to a large extent. However, if you're still set on buying a youngster, a visit to the stud and a good chat with the breeder as to exactly what you're looking for could be of real help.

Beware the gift horse

Even if you are being given a horse, a 5-stage vetting is a good idea. You'll need it for insurance purposes and I suggest you DO look a gift horse in the mouth in spite of the old saying, because veterinary bills can mean a 'free' horse turns out extremely expensive.

Find a vet you can trust to do the vetting and be there at the time it is being done. If you haven't got the time to be there when the horse is vetted – are you sure you've got the time to own a horse?

The really intelligent buyer is going to stack the odds in their favour. A buyer is less likely to waste money on a failed vetting if they have a good knowledge of conformation and study the horse's soundness themselves as far as they are able.

Horse owners need to understand that good conformation is not merely vanity and that even a slightly misshapen hoof or leg can add up to unsoundness fairly soon. In a future *IH Magazine*, we will be looking at the basics of conformation and 'veterinary checks' that we can judge ourselves.

Vet Dr Jessica Kidd says the question on the 'safest' time to buy a horse as regards soundness is an interesting one.

"You could argue it either way: the younger horses are in the age bracket for developmental diseases to show up; while older horses have more miles on the clock and the wear and tear injuries will start to show up. If you are buying a horse that is already doing the discipline you are buying him to go on doing, and doing it without issue, then there is a good chance that will continue."

Kelly will be running two day Horse Psychology courses in Lambourn, Berkshire on April 5 & 6 and August 16 & 17, where more of these issues will be discussed, including breed types.

CASE STUDY

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW THE BEST OF THE BEST MAKE THEIR BUYING DECISIONS

IH member and good friend, Joanna MacInnes, owner of the Whalton Stud, Penrith, Cumbria, has been breeding top quality horses and ponies for over 50 years, winning many major trophies and championships throughout the UK in that time.

Jo undoubtedly has a great 'eye' for a horse but, when I asked her secret, in typical modest fashion she says: "I am not sure I am the right person to ask this, as I have bought very few horses in my life apart from stallions!"

I asked Jo how she came to buy Kilvington Scoundrel, the most successful sire of show horses and ponies of all time (At HOYS 2012, Scoundrel sired the champion and reserve hack, champion and supreme riding horse and the 148cms Riding Pony of the Year. At the Royal International in the same year, he sired the champion hack, champion novice riding horse and supreme champion pony, which was also supreme at the BSPS Summer Championships).

"When I went to see him, he was a very backward yearling with a great opinion of himself, but he had lovely limbs, a huge unfurnished front, and a charming head and eye. He was larking about too much to tell how he moved, so I asked his owner to turn him into a field and was promptly bowled over by his superb movement and natural balance.

Photo courtesy of Anthony Reynolds

Kilvington Scoundrel

"I really was so impressed with him in action that, in spite of in no way wanting or needing a colt at the time, I bought him that evening. I just could not get him out of my head and thought it would be a great shame to geld him," says Jo, who had only gone to see him to offer advice to the breeder.

"In normal circumstances, I think you need to have a clear idea of the type of horse/pony you are looking for, bearing in mind what you want to do with it and try not to be side-tracked from your ideas. When I bought Java Tiger, who turned out to be a highly successful sire of dressage, event and show horses, I was looking for a thoroughbred with good conformation, a good temperament and straight, athletic movement.

"Above all, you must really feel you have found what you are looking for (or even something you really like when not looking for it!) and not be tempted to compromise on your ideas. They say 'all things come to him who waits' and you are less likely to regret a purchase if you have patience and resist the temptation to 'make do'."

Photo courtesy of Vincent Taylor

Kilvington Scoundrel, the most successful sire of show horses and ponies of all time

WHAT YOU'RE SAYING ON THE SUBJECT ON IH MEMBERS DISCUSSION GROUP FORUM

• "We have 9 ex-race horses [from Shy Lowen]. Every one of them was in a home they shouldn't have been in – one of them, a previously successful sprinter, had been sold as 'safe for a novice teenager to ride'; during a hack to the beach, that teenager ended up being airlifted to hospital with a broken neck. The horse is a good ride for the right rider and is in a loan home successfully competing and still goes to the beach.

We have horses with Mtoto, Roberto and Nijinsky in their breeding: the people who bought them had stars in their eyes ... they wanted a little piece of this elitism.

So for nine people (and their families/ friends) a beautiful dream became a nightmare and for nine horses a life at risk of an untimely end and an unfair 'dangerous' label. If each of these people had just had advice then maybe they'd have made a more informed decision about exactly who their equine partner should be."

• "I've had two friends badly caught out by buying four-year olds, when what they wanted were sensible RC types. Both chose to overlook the fact that the horses were babies, and both wanted to trust their sellers who both said the horses were totally sane and sensible."

• "Next time I will try and buy a horse that is doing the work I want to do; Bonnie was not in work when I bought her and I thought she was wasted doing nothing. She had no muscle definition, which I put down to being out of work.

With hindsight, a horse bought out of the field should still have had more topline. She was rising six when I bought her and we have had to overcome a lot of issues.

I did have her vetted, but just heart, eyes etc, not 5-stage. BUT I do not regret buying her for a moment. I love her dearly and she has taught me an incredible amount."

• "Do I regret my experiences with my horse? No. Would I wish those experiences on anyone else? Absolutely not!". IH