

SO YOU HAVE DECIDED TO BUY A HORSE

By Amanda Preston

The how-to guide to purchasing and first-time ownership. *Congratulations! You've come to terms with your passion for the equine species and you're ready to join the ranks!*

I would never discourage anyone from purchasing a horse. Horses, in whatever form, is a passion that I am always happy to share. However, I would recommend that there may be a way of doing things that will set you up for success above others. Here's my thoughts:

What KIND of riding would you like to do?

Are you passionate about pirouettes and tempis, want to jump puissance walls, or just relax with the family up in the breathtaking beauty of a mountain trail? Not sure? There's nothing wrong with that. Try all sorts of riding disciplines, educate yourself in what's involved in each, see if there are local clubs/groups to volunteer with and learn what's out there.

That ugly 4-letter word C.O.S.T.

I know you've heard it many times before, but it's an ugly truth about horses. Frequently the EASY part is BUYING the horse! Now that you've decided which direction you want to go with your horse, look realistically at what it's going to cost you to go in that direction. Tack, costuming, BOARD, TRAINING, transport, feed, extra feed, farrier, show fees, park fees, supplies, insurance, etc. etc. While there are certainly means to reduce cost and still get where you want to go, every discipline and equine activity does require a financial commitment as well as time.

That other 4-letter word T.I.M.E.

So you've decided what you want to do, and you've budgeted and you can afford to do it. Now, unless you've remortgaged your home, or are inherently wealthy (I'm not judging here...) you're likely working full time and quite possibly have a family. Owning a horse, especially a COMPETITIVE animal, requires a very serious time commitment from his owner and your trainer/coach will be more happy NOT to have to hound you to get your butt in the tack. Even your trail horses need regular attention and physical conditioning to be able to take you on your grand mountain trail adventure.

The one that we don't think about, the potential for heart break.

Alright, everything's happened! You've got a great balance, you've found a great trainer, the right horse, he's even passed the vet inspection with flying colours! We're one week away from our first show, couldn't be more excited ... and he trips over a stick in the paddock and breaks his cannon in four places. Boom game over. Almost every horse person I know who's been in this industry for more than a few years has dealt with this kind of situation first hand, myself included. While having your horse insured can help you recover financially from this catastrophe, it will never fill the hole it can leave in your heart. Something else to keep in mind. Your new best friend is mortal and horses seem to be incredibly good at finding that one nail in the fence, that one rock in the ring, or that one bit of hay that just didn't go down right.

The best part.

For me, the best part of having horses is having horse-people friends. These are the people who understand your crazy passion, nonsensical talk and anal-retentive nature about your horse's coat/weight/poop/shoe size/what colour he looks best in/new show sheet/favorite trail to ride, etc. They share in your every success (no matter if it was only an 8" x-rail you've just jumped for the first time EVER) and mourn every loss with you as well. Horses are a gift and bring amazing gifts with them. Every adventure is one I'm glad to share.

When shopping, please keep in mind:

- Let's be honest about your riding level and buy something that's ready for you, where you are now. If you are insecure and perch on a horse instead of sitting into him, then getting a greeny who will drop his shoulder and watch you somersault down to the dirt, likely isn't the best option for you. Maybe something that's been around for a few years and has had some steady training and miles on it is better suited. The idea of learning "with" your horse is never a safe one. One of you really needs to know what you're doing to teach the other. The blind are not good at leading each other.
- Have another HONEST set of eyes with you when you go shopping. Your coach is always a great choice; however, sometimes these very talented and experienced riders aren't seeing things with the same perspective they should be. If you're looking for an unstarted 2 year old, sure THEY will be able to start that horse for you, but they will likely have to continue on riding and even showing your horse for you for the next 2 – 3 years before you have the skill to take over. Please see the previous point regarding C.O.S.T. as you'll need to be taking lessons while your horse is in training. If this is really, really what you want to do, that's awesome! But please be realistic about your skill, knowledge and what's actually suitable for you right now. There's not a darn thing wrong with starting at the beginning. Even Todd Ehret was once a beginner.
- If you're looking for a ready-made school master, who will take you to nationals and pack you around and WIN, be prepared to pay for it, and no, likely it won't come with a saddle. If you want to WIN the big ribbons, I wish you all the best in the world with every bone in my person; however, I would recommend you pull up your boot straps and commit the time in the tack to being able to RIDE your way there. Please see previous point regarding T.I.M.E.
- How suitable is the horse to your sport/discipline? Some breeds are better suited to different kinds of riding than others, there's nothing wrong with that. I'm not built to be a marathon runner, but I can still dance pretty good. Do your research and buy with your head, not your heart.
- Try out a LOT of horses. Really see what's out there, what's available in your price range, what do you like in this horse, what didn't you like in that one? It will help you to become more focused on what's going to work for you and what's not.

Ultimately, like Olympian Dr. Cesar Parra said, "If you're not having FUN, why are you riding??!!"