

THE BUYING AND SELLING OF HORSES

by Gwynn Turnbull Weaver

Standing alone, out by the barn, I hold a small piece of paper that flutters in my hand. I grip it firmly between my thumb and forefinger. The wind is trying to wriggle it from my grasp. I'm looking off down the drive, where a pickup and horse trailer winds its way past our house, headed out onto the county road. A flood of emotion envelops me; an odd combination of sorrow and joy, hope and regret. I hear the truck's engine surge as they pull out, and I get the old familiar feeling in my stomach, like a mule kick to the belly. As the horse trailer grows smaller, the sun reaches into it one last time and illuminates the head and neck of the horse inside. I see an ear swivel back, the corner of the eye I have looked into for so long, the curl of mane that I have tended over and over again; and they are gone. I look down at the check in my hand. The amount seemed sufficient, was sufficient, but the paper looks small and meaningless to me in this moment. Someone has bought my horse.

A touchy thing, this buying and selling of horses. Anytime money, emotion and ego are potentially involved, the going gets rough. I have bought horses that have been misrepresented to me, drugged, crippled, nerved, foundered, navicular, and the like. I have bought horses that were treacherous or mentally damaged beyond reasonable hope of repair. I have been on the receiving end of a fair amount of debauchery. I have also sold horses that ended up being mistreated, ignored, ill used and neglected. Knowing all this, there are rules to this game that must be practiced and respected. They are not rules drawn up by the family attorney, nor were they crafted in the dank barn of some wily horse trader. Mother Nature set the boundaries and thankfully so. She is not easily influenced by money, fame or social status. As the saying goes, the rain drops fall from heaven on all of us equally, and so it goes with our relationships with horses.

HORSES LIVE A LONG TIME. Twenty-five is now not uncommon. Unfortunately, human whim tends to run a little shorter than that. Business models in the horse business suggest that the majority of market share encompasses folks who stay with their equine interest for about 6 years. Unfortunately, horses have been added to the ever growing list of quick fix, fad-driven, grown-up "trophy toys." Jet-ski, Harley, four-wheeler, Arcti-cat...cutting horse, dressage horse, reiner and so on. Like it or not, those are the facts.

This means horses will be bought and horses will be sold by many folks who are not committed to the lifelong discipline of horsemanship. On the list Mother Nature requires when dealing with one of her living things, commitment is fairly close to the top.

It is easy to see why so many sales go sour, for both the buyer and the seller.

WE ALL PAY FOR KNOWLEDGE. There is no getting out of it. One of the greatest things horses have to offer us is their ability to keep us real. We can delude everyone else around us, but the horse knows what is in our core, and will, over time, require that we own up to it. For these reasons, buyers must work to understand their level of ability and purchase a horse based on that ability. If buyers are not capable of making a sound decision regarding their own ability, they must seek the advice of someone who is capable. Buyers must be realistic regarding their level of ability and their level of commitment.



Anyone, no matter their level of experience, will incur a level of risk when buying a horse. There is no getting around it. The amount of risk, as in all things, depends on a buyer's preparedness and the level of integrity the seller possesses. But risk is part of the deal and it must be acknowledged.

To understand the boundaries of risk, we must first understand a basic principle behind it. Risk does not stand alone in the world; it exists only in the presence of commitment. If three glasses of liquid sat on the table, two of them contained only water and one of them contained an odorless, tasteless poison, a person would not have to accept any level of risk until a commitment was made to drink one of them. Until that time, the glasses would remain harmless.

If a person is uncomfortable with risk, they will have difficulty making a commitment. If they are not capable of making a commitment and seeing it through, they would do best to avoid horse ownership all together. As harsh as that statement might sound, it is true and needs to be said. Horses deserve better than half-hearted direction. If a person can't commit to the decision they made to buy a particular horse, chances are good they will have difficulty with the thousand little commitments required when attempting to ride a horse with any quality. *This does not mean that a buyer who makes a mistake and purchases*

ity, especially from the horses' perspective, if these principles were embraced.

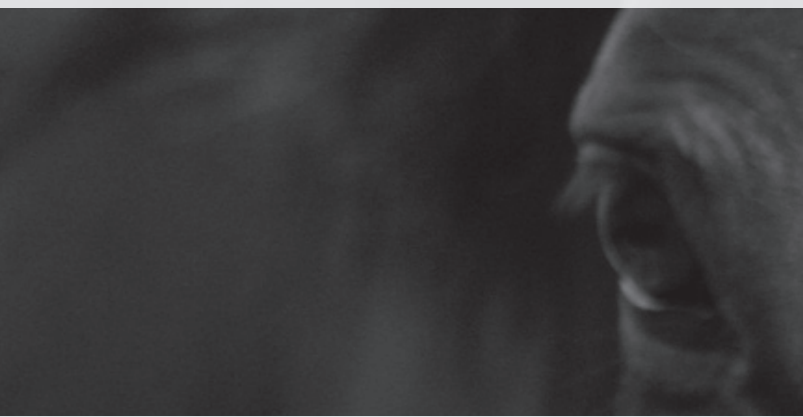
A gentleman I know has returned every horse he had the option of returning over a three-year span. I call it the "ground hog day syndrome." He is destined to repeat his purchasing mistakes into eternity because every time he returns one, he gives away the lesson that came with it. Do it if you will, but the price of returning a horse to a seller is far too great in my book. My mistakes belong to me. It is important that I claim them. Every one has moved me forward, further down the road of competence. Some of them have been financially crippling, some have been emotionally devastating, many have been physically brutal and once in a while all three. But the lessons were there to be claimed if only I would pay the price. This probably sounds ridiculous to most folks. So be it. Being accountable for my choices is a matter of honor and I accept it, sometimes at great cost. This principle has deepened my self-respect, and in so doing, I have much more to offer the horses I have the privilege of riding.

ONE LAST THOUGHT, about return policies: In my opinion, if a buyer wishes to retain the option of returning the horse later if "things don't work out," I am open to the idea if they offer me the same privilege. More plainly stated, I should be able to contact them a few months down the road and let them know that I have changed my mind. I want the horse back; perhaps I have found a buyer willing to offer more money for the horse, or perhaps a new buyer that I feel is better suited to the horse has shown up. Sound ridiculous? It is, but that is what would have to be acceptable behavior if we were to bring the concept into balance. And with horses, balance, and commitment, is what it's all about.

I'm pulling up under our big oak tree. The rattle of the trailer bouncing down the gravel has caught the ears of the horses up on the hill. Their heads jerk up, mouths full of sweet spring grass; they stop chewing, listening. The new horse I have in the trailer calls out to them. The bunch gathers itself and rolls down the hill and across the creek to our corral. I walk briskly from the pickup to the trailer, eager to see my new horse again and eager to turn him out to get acquainted with the rest. They roil around him, smelling and squealing, trotting on out ahead of him.

My heart is in my throat and I smile, wondering what great adventures we will have together. What piece of the grand puzzle will this horse offer me, and will I be committed enough to grasp it?

The horses toss tails over their backs and power out into the rolling hills. The new horse tosses his head up and over his shoulder my way before disappearing over the ridge with them and is gone. I blink away the dust and think of the lessons I have waiting this moment, all wrapped up and thundering on out into the sun.



a horse that is clearly beyond their current capabilities needs to die trying to make it right. Not at all. But the lesson will cost something, they always do. The cost may be exacted on any of the three areas of potential discomfort: financial, emotional or physical. The sting of the lesson is an important and valuable commodity and is not to be denied. It has value and should be counted as such. A person is not made "less" for having made a mistake in buying a particular horse unless that person does not embrace the value of the lesson. Committed people know this and have the constitution to shoulder the weight of their decisions, accept the risk, make the decision and if they fail, endure the sting of the lesson with head held high. The horse world would be drastically smaller but infinitely higher in qual-