

Finding the Right Dressage Horse

An Amateur's Buyer's Guide



By Kate McAuliffe

Sharon Little and Fryso fan Bosksicht. Dancing Petals Photo & Design, Cortney Drake©

With their willingness to please, lovely dispositions and expressive movement, it's no surprise that Friesians have become increasingly popular in competitive dressage. More and more amateur riders have growing aspirations to move up the levels of dressage and are choosing the Friesian breed as their mounts because of the amazing partnerships these horses form with their riders. Characteristically, Friesians have excellent work ethic and forgiving temperaments—they honestly want to do right by their partners. In addition, many lines are very calm and brave, making them wonderful novice rider mounts, however, it's always smart to stick to a process when choosing one for your dressage horse. So many novice riders choose to buy horses that turn out to be unsuited to them, and end up feeling frustrated, stuck and unable to progress. Having a good dressage

trainer is paramount. Whether you and your horse will be in full training, or if you just need some direction once a month or so, a professional eye is always helpful. Having the help of your trainer will make your horse shopping experience much more successful. If you do not currently have a trainer, the USDF website offers lists of qualified dressage trainers, sorted by your region.

KNOW WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

Determine your goals as a rider. Are you hoping to find a horse that you can do some lower level dressage and a little trail riding on, or are you looking for a partner you can earn your USDF Bronze, Silver, and Gold Medals with? Before you begin your search, take an internal inventory of your skill set and be realistic with your goal setting. For example, if you plan on

competing, look for horses with established show records. You can find a horse's dressage show record on *Centerlinescores.com* by entering the horse's registered name. The site will provide you with records of the horse's shows, levels and scores, provided they were achieved at rated shows. It's very important to select a horse whose level of training appropriately matches your level of skill as a rider. It is highly recommended that an less experienced amateur selects a horse that knows more than they do. Schoolmasters, for example, are wonderful at teaching a novice rider the movements and feel while also building confidence. Geldings tend to be a bit more evenly keeled than mares. Stallions are for professionals.

KNOW YOUR BUDGET

A Friesian suitable for dressage can cost between \$10k and \$100k, depending on age, talent, ratings, bloodlines and predicates. Young, inexperienced horses can carry an attractive price tag but are not recommended for novice riders. You will pay a little more for an older, seasoned gentleman but will have much more fun learning from him while you move up the levels. Once you know what you're looking for, it will be easier to narrow down your list of prospects.

SEARCH FOR GOOD TEMPERAMENT AND RIDEABILITY

Always try before you buy! When scheduling a visit to see your chosen prospects, ask your trainer to accompany you to try out the horse. Ask the seller to wait until you arrive to get the horse ready for viewing. It's beneficial for you to see how the seller retrieves the horse, grooms the horse and tacks the horse up. Any signs of behavior issues will show up during these tasks. No horse is perfect; they all have quirks. These quirks are what give them their undeniable personality! You just want to make sure those quirks don't make you feel unsafe or fearful. Take note of any oddities or red flags: Is the horse easy to catch and halter? Does he have good ground manners? Does he fidget in the crossties? Is he fussy about grooming, tacking up or bridling? Remember, you are looking for a horse that you feel comfortable handling and riding by yourself — keep that in mind during the entire viewing process.

Always have your trainer ride the horse before you decide to get on. Watch closely for the quality of the horse's gaits. Rule of thumb is, a good walk and canter is a must, you can always fix the trot. Friesian's trots are usually their best gaits so make sure the one you choose has an even better walk and canter. If your trainer feels the horse has good gaits and is appropriate for you, hop on and see how the horse feels. It's also helpful to have someone video your ride so you are able to review it later.

During your ride, make sure you walk, trot and canter both directions. Your gut instinct is important, so make a list of the

feel you get from the horse. Is he comfortable to sit on? Is he willing to go forward? Does he respond well to your aids? Do his gaits feel easy to ride? Does he feel soft in the mouth or too strong? Does he feel relaxed or is he a bit nervous and spooky? Does your trainer feel he's a good match for you? Last but not least, is he FUN to ride? It's important that you feel like you can accomplish your goals on the horse you end up buying, but you also want to ENJOY the journey!

DETERMINE GOOD HEALTH AND SOUNDNESS

Once you've chosen a prospect you'd like to move forward on, you'll want to have him checked out by a good vet. A vet check might seem costly, but it's a smart investment to avoid purchasing a horse that turns out to have problems later on.

Always choose the vet you use for the pre-purchase exam yourself—it's ill-advised to use a seller's vet as you want an unbiased source providing the exam. A standard pre-purchase exam usually consists of a general vitals check, body condition check, a quick dental check and flexion tests. Depending on the findings of the flexion tests, your vet may then recommend X-rays to look for changes in the joints. Remember, no horse is perfect. Older, more experienced horses will almost always show signs of wear and tear on their joints. Some younger horses may even exhibit slight changes. Most of the time these are minor issues, which can be treated with maintenance that your vet can determine and discuss with you.

Your pre-purchase exam is used to determine whether that horse will be able to accommodate your riding goals or not. Keeping that in mind will help you make a decision to buy or not when provided with the results of the vetting. Don't forget to share the pre-purchase results with your trainer so you can go over all of the pros and cons together, and get their professional opinion.

BE PATIENT

Dressage is a discipline that requires great patience, so it only makes sense that the same rule should apply to choosing the right dressage partner. There is no set timeline to finding the right horse, so take your time, apply due diligence and enjoy the process. The time and effort you put in will be well invested when you finally find your perfect partner. Then the real fun begins of building a bond with your new horse and working together on the path to achieve your goals.

***Remember,
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for a horse
that you feel
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