



One Veterinarian's Thoughts on the Often Controversial...

Prepurchase Examination

by Katherine M. Fox, D.V.M.
The Fenway Foundation for
Friesian Horses

I have been in the horse business for a number of years and in that time, I have had many experiences that have caused feelings of anxiety and uneasiness. As a equine veterinarian, the prepurchase examination always seems to take everyone's anxiety level up a couple of notches, not surprisingly, as the outcome of such an examination has quite an impact on all parties involved. The seller may potentially lose a sale or find out that their horse has a health issue that even they were not aware of. To be more optimistic, the seller finalizes the purchase and smiles all the way to the bank. The buyer may become disappointed that the horse initially thought to be perfect for an endeavor is found to have an issue, which means the search is still ongoing. On a happier note, the buyer may be writing a check and taking home the horse of their dreams. The veterinarian has the opportunity to be the hero or the villain, sometimes both at the same time!! Whatever the outcome, the prepurchase examination is often a stressful experience for everyone involved and a sigh of relief is often heard when it is finally done.

There is quite a lot of information out there about what the actual prepurchase examination should entail and my intent with this article is not to explore that subject in depth. Rather, I would like to reflect more on what some of the misunderstandings are with this examination so that anyone who reads this article can approach their next prepurchase examination with a greater degree of confidence and understanding. Mind you, this is my perspective as a veterinarian, a horse owner and someone who has been both a buyer and a seller. You may not agree with me, but if I can provide some "food for thought", then I have accomplished my goal.

By its very definition, the "prepurchase examination" should be done prior to the actual purchase of the horse. I have participated in the "post purchase exam", which really is just a fact-finding mission for the new owner who has already signed on the line and taken the horse home. While I think this "post purchase" exam still has a lot of merit, as knowing everything you can about your new horse is never a bad thing, it certainly can be tough if you discover a significant health issue in a horse

that is already bought and paid for. It can be very disappointing, disheartening and expensive.

The Buyer's Responsibilities:

The prepurchase exam should only be undertaken once the buyer has decided that this is the horse that they want, not be done as a way to "break the tie" in the case of indecision between prospects. It is important that the buyer have multiple physical contacts with the horse they are considering to make sure that it is the "same horse every time" and that the horse suits them, both in athletic ability and temperament. Being a prepared buyer means doing your homework on the horse such that you and your veterinarian can work together to make the most out of the prepurchase.

So, how do you choose the veterinarian that will do the prepurchase examination for you? It is a conflict of interest for the seller's veterinarian to do the exam, I cannot state that strongly enough. It is the buyer's responsibility to find a veterinarian in reasonable proximity to the horse that has the expertise to perform the exam (if the horse resides outside your own veterinarian's practice area) but who does not have a prior relationship with the seller. This veterinarian works for the buyer and needs to be chosen by the buyer. Networking with other horse owners in the area, asking your own veterinarian for a referral or contacting an organization like the American Association of Equine Practitioners are some good ways to find an equine veterinarian that can perform this service. Be prepared when you contact them at their office to ask questions that will provide important information for you:

1. What will be included in the prepurchase examination?
2. What will be the charges to complete the examination?
3. What additional diagnostics are available? (radiographs, blood work, endoscopy, ultrasound)
4. What are the costs associated with these diagnostics?
5. If I cannot attend the prepurchase, how can I expect to be contacted during/after the exam?



Some things that the veterinarian may expect you to have done in preparation for the examination:

1. Obtain a written release for the horse's medical records (to include all health history, diagnostics, radiographs, etc.) such that these are available for review prior to the exam.
2. Farrier records
3. Deworming/Vaccination records from the seller.
4. Be sure to look at the original registration papers and make sure that the current owner is listed as the last owner of record on the papers.

The buyer needs to communicate openly with the veterinarian as to what the expectations are for the horse that is to be examined. It is important to state the discipline for which the horse is intended, an idea of how long it is expected that the horse will be used for that purpose, whether there are any issues that the buyer has spotted that are of concern, what issues the buyer considers "deal breakers" and which are concerns that they are willing to manage. Be straightforward with regards to the funds that are available for this examination, especially when it comes to additional diagnostics that may need to be done to identify any concern that may come up during the exam. Having these issues addressed ahead of time will prevent difficulties later on, guaranteed!! Be prepared to pay for the exam at the time the service is done. The buyer owns the information gained from this exam – the decision as to whether to share this information with the seller is something that needs to be determined before the examination has been undertaken and must be clearly understood between the buyer, seller and the veterinarian. The knowledge gained from this examination can be useful to everyone involved and the sharing of it is often encouraged such that the horse can benefit if additional diagnostics or treatment is needed to improve the horse's health and well being. The veterinarian is legally bound by client/patient confidentiality and cannot release the results of this examination to anyone except the buyer without the buyer's express, written permission, regardless of the perceived morals and ethics involved.

Buyers, sellers and veterinarians are not infallible people; we are all capable of making mistakes.

The Seller's Responsibilities:

The seller's responsibilities are a bit different when it comes to preparation for this very important appointment. Ideally, the horse's health and preventative care records will be organized, legible and available to the buyer and their veterinarian ahead of time. Providing any additional information about the horse, such as medications, supplements, travel history, show records, etc., in a written format that can be given to the veterinarian will help lessen the time spent getting an accurate history on the horse. It is strongly recommended that the seller be present

and available when the prepurchase exam is done, to answer questions as they come up and to handle the horse in a way in which the horse is most comfortable. It is important that the facility at which the exam takes place provide an environment conducive to this type of exam. A covered area that can be darkened is important for a thorough ophthalmic exam. A level, hard surface will be needed to assess the horse's conformation. Good footing, both in the form of a softer footing, like an arena or round pen, and firm footing, like an area of roughened blacktop, are needed to evaluate the horse's movement and soundness. Unfavorable weather must also be a consideration and a "back up plan" should be in place in the event that weather threatens a complete soundness evaluation in the absence of an indoor arena.

The seller needs to understand that unforeseen conditions in their horse may be revealed during this prepurchase examination. Often times, the seller is completely unaware of the existence of these underlying issues and it can be an awkward moment for all involved. My best advice when this happens is for everyone to maintain his or her composure and professionalism. The buyer and their veterinarian will need a private moment to determine if and how the exam will proceed, then will bring the seller into the decision at that point. This is often when things get "sticky" and good communication with clear heads often leads to the best possible outcome.

The Veterinarian's Responsibilities:

Above all, the veterinarian must be a good communicator, helping all parties to understand what is about to be undertaken with this type of examination. The veterinarian should not have any conflict of interest with respect to the seller – if it is determined that a conflict exists, the veterinarian should not perform the exam. The veterinarian should be comfortable with their knowledge base with respect to the breed of horse and the discipline for which that horse is intended. A phone conversation between the buyer and the prospective veterinarian well ahead of time will help the veterinarian understand the buyer's goals, concerns, and budget for the prepurchase, as well as determine if the veterinarian can fulfill the requirements for the examination as laid out by the buyer. On the day of the examination, the veterinarian should arrive on time, if possible, and be prepared to perform the examination in its entirety, with all necessary equipment and additional staff if needed, based on the client's desires. With respect to the examination itself, each veterinarian has his or her own unique routine and order with which they move through the exam and record their results. While the actual examination can be performed in any one of a number of ways, there should not be a portion of that horse's body that the veterinarian does not touch, visualize or assess in some manner. These results are often recorded in a worksheet type format that, again, varies widely from veterinarian to veterinarian. While standardized prepurchase forms are available for use and can act as a guide for recording results, many veterinarians like to customize their prepurchase examination form such that it mimics the order in which they are comfortable performing the actual exam.

During the examination, the veterinarian will answer questions and help the buyer to understand any findings that occur during the examination. The veterinarian will also stop the examination at the buyer's request at any time during the exam if a medical condition is revealed that the buyer is not willing or able to manage. The veterinarian is responsible for providing the buyer with a written record of the prepurchase examination within a reasonable time after the appointment. If there are any questions as to a finding on the examination itself or a "grey area" with respect to diagnostics, the veterinarian who performed the prepurchase should suggest and be willing to pursue a second opinion when it is determined that an expert's impressions will be valuable. The veterinarian's role, throughout the entire examination, is to gather and interpret information about the horse, to discover each horse's unique problems and to consider how to best manage these issues, all in an effort to advise the buyer as they make their decision whether to purchase the horse in question.

The Dreaded Flexion Tests:

Probably the least understood and most controversial portion of the examination, the flexion tests are undertaken to reveal

any underlying lameness that a horse might have in a specific joint(s). The limb is held in a particular way, depending on the joint of interest, for a length of time and then the horse is moved off (often in hand and at a trot) on a firm surface and the horse's response is graded according to its soundness. The results can be dependent on who is physically doing the flexion test, how the test is being performed, the interpretation (as a score) of the horse's response and how the horse is feeling that day. It is not a perfect system, but it is the best way presently to easily gain some knowledge about a horse's current state of soundness.

The results of these tests should be interpreted in light of everything else that has been learned about that horse up to that point and also with respect to any further diagnostics that may be performed (radiographs, for example). There are situations when a positive flexion test is definitely a cause for concern, with the prepurchase exam terminating at this point. A prepurchase examination that evolves into a lameness examination is not an uncommon occurrence, but it does require a clear determination, at that point, as to which party is pursuing the lameness and will be held responsible for any additional diagnostics and the fees that may result. Often times, the seller will elect to discontinue any further examination of the horse at that time, electing to set up an appointment with their own vet-



Hindlimb flexion - Used to assess lameness as part of the prepurchase exam.



erinarian to have the horse's lameness diagnosed at a later date.

A few additional ideas to consider:

Obtain a blood sample from the horse at the time of the examination and have it held, by the veterinarian, for a minimum of 21-30 days. This will give you the flexibility of drug testing if needed. Remember, there is not one drug test that will find any and all drugs, but you can look specifically for a class of drug based on what it is felt may have been in the horse's bloodstream at the time of the exam.

"Pass/Fail" terminology should no longer be used with respect to prepurchase examinations. A prepurchase is a fact-finding mission, an in-depth look at a particular horse at a specified point in the time line of its life. Horse's don't pass or fail – they just are who they are, none of them perfect but all of them unique and amazing in their own right.

Veterinarians don't try to "find something wrong to cover them in the case of a lawsuit". Veterinarians, for the most part, are just trying to do the job for which they have been hired to the

best of their ability for the buyer. Being careful and meticulous are traits that serve them well, both in the performance of a thorough exam and in helping to keep them neutral in the event of conflict!! Veterinarians recognize that there is no "perfect horse", but often times there is just the right owner for each and every horse. The trick is to match them up...

If a veterinarian, on a prepurchase examination, finds something wrong with a horse, are they morally and ethically bound to inform the owner?? That might depend on what the condition is, but certainly if it is life threatening, then the potential buyer is encouraged, and often very readily agrees, to release the information for the good of the horse. Most veterinarians will work very hard to make sure that the horse benefits from the examination within the confines of what they can do legally. It is a tough judgment call sometimes, but at the end of the day, we should all work together to make sure that the horse is taken care of to the best of our abilities.

Buyers, sellers and veterinarians are not infallible people; we are all capable of making mistakes.

The Prepurchase Examination is neither a warranty or guarantee, but a professionally written assessment of a horse and the risk associated with the purchase of that horse based on the findings discovered on the day of the exam.

At the end of the day, I believe that everyone involved in this examination has the same goal: to learn as much as they can about a particular horse at that small point on the timeline of its life, doing so with professionalism, understanding and respect.



The right horse
for the right rider -
Goal Accomplished!!

