

The Pre-purchase Exam – Some General Guidelines

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The prepurchase examination is one of the most important professional services offered to the horse industry by equine veterinarians.

Each veterinarian develops his/her own procedural format, documentation method and communication style regarding the prepurchase examination. To say that one approach is best would be terribly naïve. The following guidelines represent my professional opinions and I hope they will be helpful to you, whether you are a buyer or a seller.

The veterinarian should always represent the buyer. At times, situations can arise where a veterinarian is asked to vet one of his own client's horses. Most veterinarians prefer to remove themselves from these cases because it may be viewed as a conflict of interest should a condition be reported by the buyer after the sale. In this situation it could be thought that the veterinarian was reluctant to disclose information because the horse was being sold by his or her client.

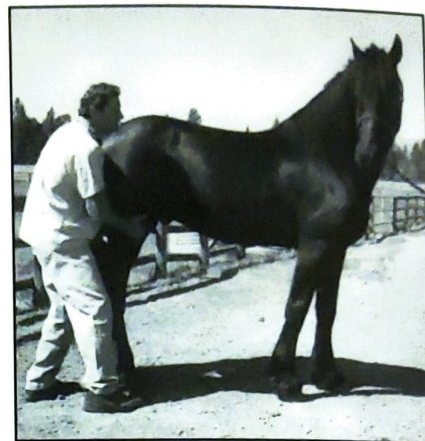
In addition, I explain to my clients (the sellers) that they have **nothing** to gain by having me examine their horses for prepurchase. I am thorough and nearly always find something "wrong" with a horse. This can only be of value to the buyer, not to the seller.

Who needs a prepurchase examination? This question is a philosophical and economic one with no clear set of rules or guidelines. It represents a decision made by the buyer(s), trainer, and/or investor(s). In general, the more an animal costs, the more you "need" a prepurchase examination. I strongly recommend prepurchase exams for investment horses and any horse of justifying value that will be resold. Buyers who are very busy, who recreate heavily with their horses, are competitive, and who develop strong emotional bonds will benefit from a prepurchase exam.

The prepurchase exam is a fact-finding mission. It also has a predictive mission. Because veterinarians do not own crystal balls, these two missions should remain distinctly separate. We look at the horse's current physical status vs. what the horse might develop in the future.

The following are some general guidelines about prepurchase examinations:

1. A veterinarian cannot guarantee or warranty an animal used for any purpose.
2. Never, ever "rush" a prepurchase exam. Allow the veterinarian to be deliberate, thoughtful and thorough.
3. Consider the veterinarian as an advisor and a consultant. Do not expect a veterinarian to "pass" or "fail" a horse after the examination.
4. The decision to purchase a horse is ultimately the buyer's, not the veterinarian's.
5. The veterinarian should not be involved with placing a value on a horse. However, I do recommend to my clients that they offer less than the purchase price if I identify any condition(s) that represent potential financial risk.
6. Terms like "in my opinion", "I cannot predict the future", or "I do not know" are appropriate for your veterinarian to use and should be expected.
7. Because the depth of a prepurchase exam can vary depending upon a buyer's finances, the cost of the exam may vary and the information derived from the exam may be limited by the cost. Therefore, the buyer should communicate his or her expectations, including cost expectations, prior to the exam.
8. Second opinions can be useful to a buyer because every veterinarian will not interpret every finding the same way. Be careful to seek a second opinion from a skilled, experienced and noteworthy veterinarian. Much confusion can be created by comments from those unqualified to give them.
9. If radiographs are to be taken, be sure of their quality. Poor films are a waste of everyone's time and money. Radiograph interpretation can become complicated. Select a competent veterinarian with orthopedic and lameness experience. Do not be afraid to use a radiologist if necessary.
10. The buyer should be presented with a written report that may be accompanied by a letter. All reports are the privileged information of the buyer. Regardless of the outcome of the sale, the veterinarian must **not** share examination results without the expressed, preferably written, consent of the buyer.



All Friesian prepurchase exams should include a stifle examination: a flexion test; digital palpation of the patella and tendons; and assessment of the range of motion or "looseness" of the patella.

Photos by Judi Knapp

How many, if any, x-rays should a buyer ask for in a prepurchase exam? As I mentioned earlier, the sale price of the horse often drives the number of x-rays taken, in an attempt to identify present and potential problems. Friesian buyers can make some educated decisions regarding x-rays by knowing which areas of the horse are "high risk" for orthopedic abnormalities.

There are two basic categories of orthopedic conditions we look for in a prepurchase examination. One is developmental orthopedic disease (OCD) and the other is traumatic and performance related injuries. Because the incidence of lameness decreases as we move from the foot to the shoulder, traumatic and performance injuries are most likely to be found in the foot, pastern and fetlock. These are good areas to include in a radiographic survey. Bony lumps near joints or tendons should also be considered for x-ray examination.

OCD, or osteochondrosis, can be found in any joint of the horse. Many OCD lesions do not cause noticeable problems and go unobserved for the life of the animal. I would rank the hock first, the stifle second and coffin joint (distal interphalangeal joint) third in highest prevalence of OCD. These areas should be surveyed in a prepurchase examination. Fortunately, the most common form of OCD we see in the hock has a very good prognosis when operated arthroscopically. Osteochondrosis is an interesting and complex developmental disease process that would make a good topic for an article in the future.