

# Finding the Right Match

By Danica Yates

Many of us don't mind surfing through Dream Horse looking at horses for sale online out of casual interest, but when it comes time to do some serious horse shopping, it can be a daunting task to find the right match. There are many factors to consider, a lot of time necessary to spend looking and in the end, you are never guaranteed that you will end up with your dream horse. Here are some ideas on what to look for and have in mind as you search for the right horse to buy.

When looking for a horse, there are two main categories to consider: the horse's body and mind. You simply cannot have a successful sporthorse without at least some degree of both physical talent and mental aptitude. In assessing a horse's body, you must analyze his confirmation and movement. Horses best suited for jumping or dressage differ in their confirmation but all good sporthorses share similar characteristics of an uphill build- necessary for increased ability to use the hind end and carry themselves lighter on the forehead.

An uphill build is revealed in the front legs, the neck and the hind quarters. The front legs need to be proportionally a little longer and set well in front of the horse. Additionally, having a long sloping shoulder influences the horse's ability to use his front end. The length and positioning of the neck impact the uphill nature of a horse's build. Dressage horses should have a neck curving upwards out of the shoulders. Jumpers should have a neck more horizontally positioned, but clearly above the level of the back. Both should have appropriately long necks with clean connections to the head. Being too thick in the throat latch area inhibits flexion through the poll. The hind legs of a good sporthorse should be built well underneath him with a moderate but not steep slope to the croup to allow the horse an ability to 'sit' in the collection or push off the ground at a jump. Standing a horse square on level ground with his head held naturally will give you an idea of this confirmation.

It is also important to witness the horse's body in motion. Sometimes, horses with marginally flawed confirmation can be incredible movers and vice versa. When going to look at a horse to buy, watch it move freely without the hindrance of a rider. Some important things to be watching for are freedom in the back, use of the hind end for pushing power, and the amount of knee action and 'reach' in the front end. You want to see that the horse 'swings' through his back as he moves. This shows relaxation and suppleness of his topline. You can watch a horse's tail as an indicator of his back realization- does the tail swing softly back and forth or does it clench or sharply swish?

It is important to observe the hind end of the horse you are interested in to see first if it steps under and tracks up. If a horse is free in his back and using his hind end well, as he walks and trots, his hind legs will step in or in front of the track that the front foot left. The 'engine' is very important in choosing a sporthorse as this is where the thrust or pushing power comes from for jumping or collection

and impulsion in dressage. You can watch to see if the hind leg steps under the horse and not trail out too far behind the horse as he pushes off, wasting thrusting energy.

Watch the horse's front end too as he moves and witness how he uses his shoulder and knee. Horses best suited for hunters move with a straighter knee, dressage horses with more elevation in the front legs. For both, freedom in the shoulder and reach of the front legs is important. With all the gaits, open, free strides are important as opposed to small choppy steps. Too much knee action can result in compromised reach. Tension in the shoulder can hinder lift in the front end creating flat, tight steps.

The confirmation and movement of a horse's body can often be the easier part in looking for a good sporthorse. Secondly and arguably as important, if not more, is the horse's mind. First of all, does he want to work? Dressage and jumping are demanding disciplines and the horse must have willingness and a desire to work. Many sporthorses have been spoiled, often not worked correctly or consistently, and no longer willingly accept their job and training. This is not to say that the work ethic of these horses cannot be improved, but it may take considerable time and effort to reverse the attitude. Other desirable traits for sporthorses include a relaxed and submissive attitude. A horse's history or natural traits can effect this. Submission and relaxation are some of the most basic elements on the dressage training tree and to set yourself up for success, it is valuable find horses with these traits right off the bat.



When searching for the right horse, not only must his mind and body be a match for the discipline you plan to use him, his personality must connect with yours.

Finally, and again not to be overlooked, is the suitability of the potential horse for the rider. What may be the perfect horse for one rider, may be too hot or too green for another rider. What may be too forward and strong for one, may delight another. When looking for a horse, he must match your own personal goals with the horse's suitability and see if your individual personalities will sync. Are you keeping the horse at home? You may want a more manageable personality in lieu of bigger bolder movement. Are you planning to do most of the training yourself or will you have the consistent guidance of a professional? Showing and the amount of 'pressure' you intend to put on you and your horse are a factor too. Some horses love to show and puff up with the opportunity- others are more shy and would be better at quiet trail rides. Always remember as you assess conformation, movement and temperament, that what may work for one horse owner may or may not work for the next. In the end you should feel a connection to the horse you ride and love.