

Finding a Horse-Trainer

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Cowgirl Image*

Horse-Training Article



Disclaimer:

Please use common sense when applying any Horse-Training advice. Horses are dangerous animals, and extreme care must be taken when working with them. Before applying any of the techniques given to you, use your own best judgement. You are responsible for your own safety -- as well as that of your horse, your property, equipment, etc.

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Finding a Horse-Trainer

By Kimberly Keown - Cowgirl Image www.cowgirlimage.net

Finding a good horse-trainer is not always easy.

Here are some helpful tips horse-owners can use to evaluate a trainer and find one they are comfortable with.

Finding a Trainer to Evaluate

The first step in finding a good trainer is to ask your friends who they have used. That is, ask the friends who have well-trained horses that behave themselves under saddle and on the ground. Don't use trainers who trained the ill-mannered, dangerous horses your friends can barely control. And remember that just because your friend loves a certain trainer, that doesn't mean you will too.

If you don't have any friends with well-trained horses, look in the paper, etc. You can also go to horse-shows or events.

If the trainer has a website, look at it. Read any training articles they've written and try to get a feel for how they work. Don't be overly impressed by a flashy website or pictures; don't be underwhelmed by a simple site. In the end, you will make your real evaluation by how the trainer works with *your* horse.

Evaluation

It's hard when you have to leave a horse at a strange trainer's place for a month and can't watch what they're doing. So before you blindly drop off your horse and hope for the best, follow these steps:

Go to the trainer's place of business and watch him/her train other people's horses. If you like him, offer to trailer your horse up for a couple sessions - maybe you can leave him there for a couple days - and watch the trainer work with him.

Many trainers require you to take the horse to their facility to train them and leave them there for a month at a time. But some trainers are willing to train the horse on a per session basis with you watching. If you live close by and want to trailer your horse to the trainer weekly or twice a week, so you can be present at all sessions, this is a good idea. Later on if you like and trust the trainer, you can leave the horse there for a month and let the trainer work with him more frequently with less oversight.

If you can't do a per session trial and do need to leave the horse at the trainers for a month, this is okay as long as you're able to go to the facility regularly and watch your horse being worked. From the very beginning, work out an arrangement where you can be present at many of the training sessions through the entire month; make sure the trainer has no objections to this and nothing to hide. That way, you can keep tabs on the trainer and learn yourself how to work with your horse. If this is not okay with the trainer or he says he doesn't have time to schedule these watched sessions, go elsewhere.

I would always regularly let my clients work with their horses both on the ground and under saddle during a training session, if the horse was safe for them. So this should also be part of the deal as the horse progress in his training. If the trainer has a separate price for 'lessons' with you working with the horse, work this out beforehand.

I used to have a separate price for straight training vs. lessons; then I finally went to a flat rate that included training the horse myself and giving the client lessons. Training is much more effective when the horse's regular rider/handler is integrated into the process. Even if the horse is not safe for you to ride, there's always ground-training you can learn to do such as leading, lunging, and handling the horse's hooves. The more you work with your horse in a controlled environment, the better off you will be when you get him home.

A good trainer will explain his actions and methods as he goes along. Don't be afraid to ask questions; but if the trainer is working through a conflict, save them until it's resolved. A good trainer will voluntarily explain it all to you afterward, anyway. If the trainer seems unwilling to communicate during the session, perhaps he's not the right trainer for you.

Safety

Make sure the trainer emphasizes safety - both in his words and actions. Remember, whatever *he* does is what he will teach you and your horse.

You can get a good idea of how safety-conscious a trainer is by the way he handles a horse on the ground. In a nutshell, if a trainer is careless with a horse on the ground, he's probably not much better in the saddle.

For example, a good trainer will not carry a lead line in a loop where it can wrap around his hand if the horse suddenly spooks or runs off. A good trainer will not stand directly in front of a horse while holding it. Nor will he let it follow directly behind him when led, where it could clip the his heels or push him over if the horse suddenly spooked.

Watch the trainer pick up the horse's hooves. A good trainer will be very safety-conscious about this and start with a front hoof, then move to the back. A safety-conscious trainer will never start with a back hoof. He will never appear careless or indifferent to the horse, or otherwise ignore the potential peril of working around the horse's feet. If the horse is tied (I don't recommend tying a strange horse to pick up his feet, but many trainers do it), the trainer should NEVER duck under the lead rope to move from one front hoof to the other, or do anything that could cause the horse to pull back.

Safely working around a horse's feet requires a certain 'bedside manner'. The trainer should not upset the horse, let the feet drop unceremoniously to the ground, or handle the hooves or legs roughly. If the trainer is insensitive in this area, he will probably be insensitive in other areas of the horse's training.

Discipline

A good trainer will discipline the horse. I don't mean abuse the horse... I mean discipline him. All horses act up due to bad manners, youth, ignorance, or stress. A trainer exists to teach a horse to always respect the handler's space, so that when he's under stress he reacts in a way that's the least dangerous to his handler.

To some degree, though the horse might be afraid of whatever stressor is out there to spook him, he should be more afraid of his handler than the stressor; so he reacts in a way to avoid violating the handler's space and consequently jumping on him, pushing him, kicking him, etc.

For example, a horse should be taught to lead to the side of the handler. When he spooks, he should respect the handler's space enough that he jumps away from the handler; not into him.

When a trainer never openly disciplines a horse, or a horse mysteriously never seems to act up with him and appears excessively unalert and unenergetic, that raises red flags for me. It's possible the horse is being drugged, and that's why he appears so calm or disinterested.

A trainer's training methods should never be mysterious. They should be well thought-out, consistent, and verbally explainable. They should be aboveboard, teachable to the client, based on solid principles, and effective.

A trainer should be sensitive to the horse's emotional state and never rush a horse in his training. A good trainer always emphasizes quality of training over quantity. That said, the horse should make measurable progress. If he's not making steady progress in his training over a period of time, then his time and your money is being wasted.

Owner Expectations and Personality Conflicts

Even the best trainer in the world cannot get along with every horse... and especially every owner. If you do not like a trainer's style, methodology, how he treats you or your horse, or simply his personality, do not hire him.

Be aware that owners can be a bigger problem to a trainer than their horses. While an owner should insist on aboveboard communication from the trainer and be able to watch any and all training sessions, the owner should likewise respect the trainer and behave accordingly.

This means showing up on time or early for all training sessions. It means paying the trainer promptly for services and paying the agreed-upon amount.

Realize that horses do not watch the clock. If you have scheduled an hour training session (I prefer hour-and-a-half training sessions), and the horse is acting up and needs a longer session that day, be prepared to pay for an extra 1/2 - 1 hour. Don't short the trainer on pay for all of his time, and don't short the horse on the critical training he needs.

Focus on the quality of training, not the quantity. In our age of the 30-day wonder, many owners expect their horses to be drop-dead saddle broke in 30-days. This invariably leads to bad habits, extreme stress on the horse, and training holes that have to be corrected later. Instead of insisting a horse be 'trained' by a certain date, look for measurable results; and realize you will have to pay for those results over a period of time. As long as the horse is making solid progress, keep him in training. Six months is not too long to wait or too much to pay, to get a happy, respectful, properly trained horse.

Above all, an owner needs to respect that the trainer is risking his life while working with your horse. He is voluntarily putting himself in a very dangerous situation. Owners should not interfere during a training session without cause. Assume that the trainer knows more than you do about how to handle the horse in that specific situation. This means being patient while the trainer works through bad behavior and difficulties with the horse, and not chiming in with your 2-cents or excuses for the horse's behavior.

Never do anything to compromise a trainer's safety. Do not be distracting; do not make loud, sudden noises; do not bother the trainer with needless chitchat or questions while he is working through a conflict. Forget that your horse is a beloved pet, and remember that he is a 1,000 lb animal that can and will kill or injure someone in a heartbeat. After all, if your horse was easy to handle you wouldn't need a trainer, would you?

Conclusion

Three things must come together in order to have a successful horse-training relationship: the client, the horse, and the trainer. If any two of these three factors don't match up, the training relationship fails. The failure may not be anybody's fault... it may in the end just be due to personality conflict.

So if one trainer is not right for you, keep looking. Now that you have a little methodology of your own to use to evaluate your horse's trainers, your odds of finding that right relationship are increased dramatically. When you do find it, treat your trainer as you (should) treat your horse... be firm, but fair. Do your part to preserve that relationship; it should be rewarding for all three of you.

Good luck!