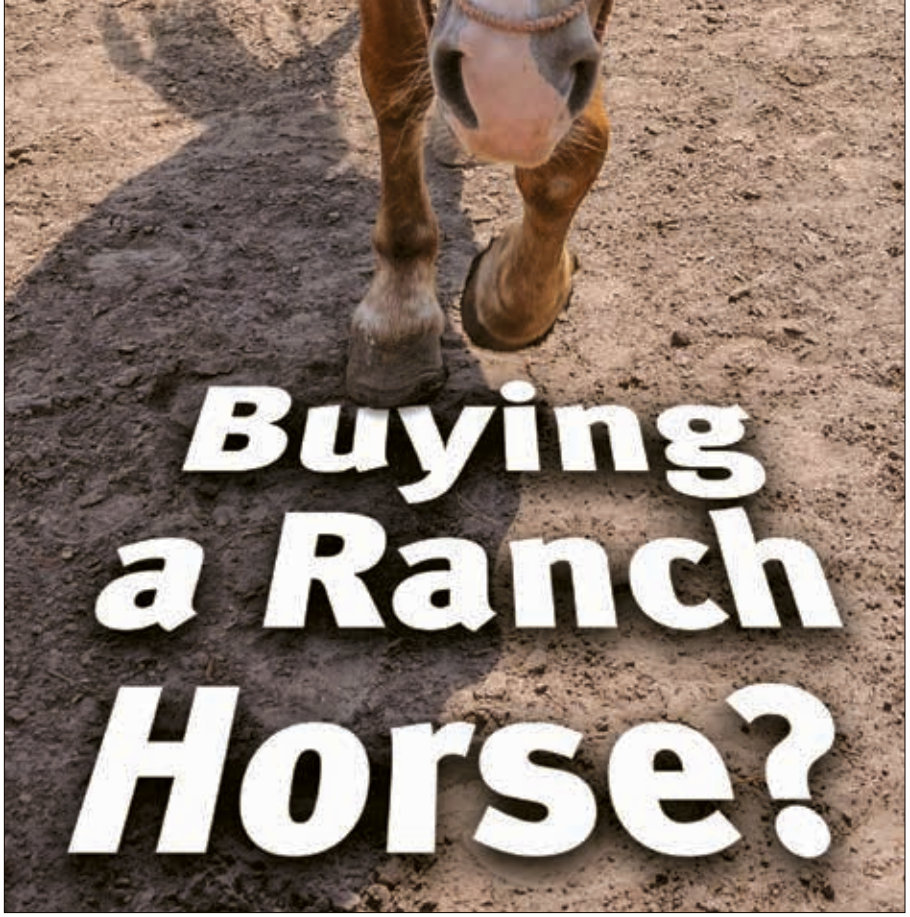

Buying a Ranch Horse?

Horse buying requires homework and patience.

*by **Troy Smith,** field editor*

Historically, in cases of horse sales transactions gone sour, the buyer was the loser. Hence the expression, "Buyer Beware." That was understood, back when the world relied on genuine horsepower. Horse-savvy people were wary when considering a purchase. You would be, too, if you used horses every day and your livelihood depended on it.

That was then; it's different now. On some cattle operations, the remuda has been traded for a stable of all-terrain vehicles, or ATVs. Of course, many cattle outfits still use ranch horses for real ranch work. Some ranches use horses extensively. Other cattle producers use their ranch horses seasonally, or only on occasion. They may also saddle up on weekends, however, for sport. A growing share of today's stock horse industry is geared to recreational riding and competition, including events that showcase the attributes of a well-trained ranch horse.

What makes a good ranch horse? Plenty of prospective horse buyers struggle with that question, particularly if their horse-buying experience is limited. There are lots of good ranch horses — good for someone. Perhaps the better question to ponder is, "What horse is best suited to the buyer?"

"I believe ranch-horse selection is a very conditional situation," states Matt Perrier of Dalebanks Angus, near Eureka, Kan. "We have at least one horse saddled for 100 to 150 days out of the year, so I believe our horses see moderate use by today's standards."

Horse work

According to Perrier, the ranch work performed on horseback includes gathering groups of cattle and penning them for processing, as well as moving groups for rotational grazing. Other tasks include sorting animals in a pasture to load in a stock trailer or drive to a pen. Sometimes, cattle are roped and restrained for treatment of injury or disease.

"We rope cattle when necessary, but we use slower 'ranch roping' techniques and try to avoid running one down. We use low-stress cattle-handling protocols, so we favor a fairly smooth, snappy horse that can get into the correct position in a quick, yet quiet manner," explains Perrier.

"Ninety-nine percent of the work is done by two men (Perrier and herdsman Eric Burden) or our children (aged 14 years and younger), so we like horses having some rider versatility," Perrier adds. "When they're not doing their real job, many of our horses pull double-duty, performing in everything from 4-H horse shows to parades."

Perrier prefers Quarter Horses, but he's not overly picky about size and color. He holds to the old horseman's maxim, "No foot, no horse," meaning sound feet and legs are essential to a horse's useful purpose. Perrier looks for classic Quarter Horse conformation that allows for flexion and athleticism. He wants a horse to exhibit enough speed that it can get into position to direct a herd, turn a specific animal or put the rider within rope's reach of a calf. Athleticism and speed are assets in the 4-H arena, too, with one of Perrier's children in the saddle.

"I want a horse to have a good mind and an even disposition. I want it to retain its training and not be overly reactionary after being exposed to a stimuli for a few times," adds Perrier. "It's important for a horse to have heart — plenty of try. I want it to stick

with me, willingly, until a job is done."

"Cow sense" has been called the most desirable trait for a ranch horse to possess. It's an aptitude typically credited to genetics. However, Perrier believes a horse with a good mind and willing disposition can acquire a generous measure of cow sense through its training.

"Maybe I've simply been lucky, but I have yet to have a horse that, with proper training and experience, didn't eventually learn enough cow sense to get the job done," says Perrier. "Conversely, I have witnessed a horse or two that would ignore a rider's cues and go after a cow of his own accord. In my mind, that may be worse than having a horse with no 'cow' at all."

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Differences in training

Exhibition of cow sense is part of ranch horse competition, an equine sport that continues to grow in popularity. Ranch horse competitions typically include elements of reining, cutting, roping and trail riding, and are designed to showcase the versatility required of real ranch horses. However, according to former collegiate ranch-horse team coach Roy Cole, of Curtis, Neb., there often are differences between "real" ranch horses and horses used in ranch-horse competitions.

An instructor and farm manager at the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture, Cole still mentors students who compete in collegiate ranch-horse competitions sanctioned by the American Stock Horse Association. Cole warns that some horses trained specifically for performance in an arena may not suit a person seeking a horse for everyday ranch work.

"For example, reining is part of ranch-horse competition, and some trainers work hard to put a long, sliding stop on their horses. It's really neat, but it's probably not what most people need from a working ranch horse. They don't want a horse to slide 20 feet before stopping. Usually, they want it to stop right now," explains Cole.

Many trainers also emphasize collection, so that when the rider picks up on the reins, the horse flexes at the poll, tucks its nose and shifts a greater percentage of weight to its hindquarters. A collected horse has its body prepared to respond quickly to the rider's next cue. Cole thinks collection is sometimes emphasized too much, to the point that a horse is nearly always looking down at its front feet.

"I guess I'm just an old cowboy that's spent too much time riding up and down hills and over rough ground. I want my horse looking forward to see what is ahead. I don't want it looking down," grins Cole. "You occasionally see a horse that's always been ridden in an arena — never outside. That doesn't mean it's not a good horse, but it may not act as expected when placed in a different environment."

Many horses that stand out at performance competitions are what Cole calls "high-energy" horses. It's just part of their nature to be alert and ready. They may be more aggressive toward cattle, too. Those horses often appeal to people with plenty

CONTINUED ON PAGE 78

PHOTOS COURTESY DALEBANKS ANGUS

►**Left:** Matt Perrier looks for classic Quarter Horse conformation that allows for flexion and athleticism, a good mind and an even disposition.

PHOTO COURTESY NEBRASKA COLLEGE OF TECHNICAL AGRICULTURE

►Former collegiate ranch-horse team coach Roy Cole says there often are differences between "real" ranch horses and horses used in ranch-horse competitions.

PHOTO COURTESY JANN PARKER

►According to Jann Parker, the biggest mistake horse buyers make is getting in a hurry. She recommends due diligence.

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 77

of horseback work to do, by themselves or without much help. Cole favors that kind of horse himself.

"But I know a lot of ranchers that like to go slow and easy, and they prefer a horse that's more laid back," offers Cole. "You can't know how you're likely to get along [with a prospective purchase] unless you get out and ride it. You can watch someone else ride the horse and see what it's capable of in their hands. A trainer or highly experienced rider might make it look pretty good, but you won't know if a certain horse suits your purpose and your own ability until you spend some time riding it yourself."

Don't rush

Jann Parker says she and husband Bill have long encouraged prospective buyers to make arrangements to try out horses consigned to auctions hosted in Billings, Mont. For 17 years, the couple has managed the monthly horse sales conducted at the Billings Livestock Commission Co. In Parker's opinion, the biggest mistake horse buyers make is to get in a hurry. She recommends due diligence.

"Buyers need to do their homework, and that includes knowing what to expect — what the price range will be for horses that suit your purpose. We provide information about consignors, but I urge buyers to learn all they can about the sellers. Before the sale, talk with consignors of horses that interest you," advises Parker.

An advantage of well-managed consignment sales like those at Billings Livestock is the opportunity to view a large number of horses. The most likely candidates can be scrutinized during a performance preview.

"At our ranch horse sales, buyers can see every horse perform twice. The first

time, they can see each horse bridled and unbridled, how well they stand to be mounted and how well they load in a trailer. They see each horse run a little reining pattern, work a gate and box a cow. The second time, buyers can see each horse perform its specialty event," Parker explains. "There really are so many choices. It's better to take your time and just use common sense when buying any horse."

She emphasizes the need for buyers to be realistic about their own experience and skill, or the lack thereof. They should recognize their limitations and seek a horse that is compatible. Parker says too many people worry more about a horse's color than its suitability to the buyer's purpose.

"Don't let emotion drive your decision," adds Parker. "Keep looking until you find a horse that suits your needs."

The advice of Parker and Cole is supported by information from Equine Legal Solutions, a law firm based near Portland, Ore. According to its website, about 70% of inquiries received by the firm are related to horse purchases that proved unsatisfactory. The firm's data suggest that problems are more apt to arise when a buyer did not ride a horse prior to purchase. Also potentially troublesome are transactions made without having the horse undergo a prepurchase veterinary examination. However, most problems stem from first-time, inexperienced horse buyers making inappropriate choices.

Asked if inexperienced people should trust themselves to select and buy a suitable horse, Parker says, "Absolutely, but get some help. Enlist the help of a trusted advisor — someone that is knowledgeable and understands what you need and what you can afford. Then, listen to them."

Editor's Note: *Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.*