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*This article written by Dr. Erik Belloy DVM MRCVS, a partner at The Horse Clinic, is reprinted with the kind permission of The Essex Rider monthly magazine.*

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## Buyer Beware

Part 2—Ailments & Conditions that could affect your horse

*Following on from last month's article about finding a suitable horse or pony to purchase, Erik Belloy, a partner at The Horse Clinic discusses the pre-purchase examination in more detail. What can you expect from your vet, and what will they do when your prospective mount is examined. Also, you need to be aware of limitations of a veterinary examination, and form an idea of how to interpret some findings, or indeed how your vet might interpret them.*

### The Procedure

The procedure of a vetting has been carefully laid down by The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) and the British Veterinary Association (BVA). These are the minimum prescribed examinations that are recommended by our professional bodies. You might find that your vet carries out further tests which they deem to be necessary in order to find out what discoverable abnormalities are present in a horse you plan to buy. For example, most vets will carry out flexion tests when vetting a horse, and yet that is not absolutely necessary according to our professional bodies. If you are having a vetting by a vet who is not your usual vet, ask what tests they include. This becomes even more important if you are buying a horse abroad. Whilst the standards and tests carried out across counties may vary slightly, those across countries can vary wildly.

Your vet can only find out problems that are present on the day of the vetting and are discoverable on that day. Your vet will do their best to identify potential future problems, but crystal balls are not often found in the equipment available in the back of your vet's car! If your regular vet cannot carry out the pre-purchase examination for you, liaise with them as they might recommend someone to carry out the examination. Using an experienced horse vet is, in my view, essential for a pre-purchase examination.

If your regular vet also happens to be the vendor's regular vet, he can still carry out the examination provided he is allowed to disclose **all** clinically relevant information to you. Your vet will decline to vet the horse if not allowed to discuss all previous clinical findings. If you are not familiar with the area where you are buying your horse, using the vendor's vet may not be the best strategy.

### The Staged Approach

The five stage vetting is named thus because it is carried out over five distinctive stages. The stages are more concerned with the kind of exercise the horse is subjected to in each stage, rather than concentrating on the different clinical examinations your vet may carry out. Overall, after completion of the full five stages, your vet will be able to carry out a full risk assessment of the particular horse, on that particular day for you and the use you would like to put the horse to. As you can see, vet will go through the same procedure, whether vetting a future hack or a potential international event horse. The interpretation of all findings might differ in each case, but both examinations should reveal the same abnormalities.

The first stage is an examination at rest, usually in the stable. The vet will carry out careful observation, palpation and some further tests, such as listening to the heart and lungs and using an ophthalmoscope to carry out an eye examination. The vet will at this stage, also assess the horse's conformation in light of the discipline you wish the horse to be used for.

During stage two, the horse is trotted up, and in most cases, flexion tests will be carried out and the horse will be trotted on a circle on both reins on hard ground. In my personal opinion, it is absolutely essential in the 21st century that both these tests are carried out during a pre-purchase examination. These tests will highlight many orthopaedic problems that may not be detected in a quick trot up in a straight line, or even when the horse is ridden under saddle. These tests are one way in which the vet tries to make a projection towards the future. It is no good buying a horse that can jump today, but will be too lame to do so in a few months! As always, the test is one essential thing, but the

interpretation by an experienced clinician is an even more vital aspect of this examination. I will discuss interpretations in more detail in the next section of this article

Some vendors (usually dealers) have argued that to subject horses to these tests is un-natural. I am not sure whether they consider riding horses in competitions and putting them through the rigours of training for these competitions “natural”? It is extremely rare for a horse to be lame during one of these tests, and not have any clinically relevant problem. The problem they have may be temporary, or mild and not deteriorating. It could potentially be performance limiting, either now or in the future. Occasionally, one hears a story about a horse that has failed flexion tests and a year later, the horse turned out to be a very useful horse. As a purchaser, it is well worth the risk of not purchasing the horse because there will be far more horses that fail flexion tests and subsequently go lame and become unable to be used for the purpose they were intended. Experience of the clinician will lead to a careful interpretation of these tests and some tolerance can be allowed in certain cases.

Stage three involves the horse being strenuously exercised. This is an important phase because a fair few conditions will only be detected during or after strenuous exercise. Some musculo-skeletal problems, many heart problems and virtually every lung and wind problem is much more obvious during or after exercise than at rest. I would never consider buying a horse that has not gone through this phase, but it is not always carried out abroad. Many potential purchasers try to skip this phase, in the hope to save a few pennies on the examination. This is definitely poor judgement and a false economy, because many conditions can remain hidden from your vet. The vet will explain that to you before the examination, and this will result in a the vet having lower liability if the horse proves to have illnesses in future.

During stage four, the vet will check all paperwork and give the horse a rest. Some discussions and elaboration of previous examinations may be carried out during this stage. Horses are now identified by their passports and the horse should, or during stage one, be checked for the presence of a microchip.

Then, the horse is ready for stage five, when another trot up phase is carried out. This is carried out in order to establish that the horse has not become lame due to the strenuous exercise undertaken in stage three. Also, any flexions or aspects of the horse’s movement that were questionable can be re-checked before a final interpretation of the horse’s suitability for your intended use.

Extra tests can be considered if certain findings during the five stage vetting give your vet concern. For example, if they pick up a swollen ligament, they may recommend that the area is ultrasound scanned. If the horse makes a noise during exercise, they may recommend passing a camera into the horse’s respiratory tract (Endoscopy). Sometimes, usually depending on the value of the horse, certain tests are agreed from the outset. Doing loads of tests makes the vetting more expensive and more specialised to interpret. On the other hand, these tests can highlight additional risks that the standard examination cannot always bring up. In the UK the emphasis is heavily on the clinical exam, and this keeps the cost down and provides the best value for money examination. In some countries, the emphasis has completely shifted to lots of tests (for example 30 Xrays at every vetting), but some of the basics are completely overlooked. Be aware that foreign horses are sometimes imported to the UK because they have changes on x-ray that are unlikely to be picked up in a standard vetting in this country. Discussions are ongoing in the profession as to what level of examination would be best as a standard for horse owners.

### **Interpretation of findings on examination**

The interpretation of a fact can be different, depending on the use of a horse, either future or past. It is important that owners check with their future insurers that they will be lenient and extend insurance to those items that have been discovered at a vetting. In many cases, insurance companies will place extensive exclusions on horses that show only mild abnormalities. It can be down to the negotiating skills of the future owner to limit the amount of exclusions. The vet who carried out the pre-purchase examination may be able to help, either by supplying supplementary opinions or organising further work-ups (such as X Rays or Endoscopic examinations).

For example, if a horse has a slight heart murmur that could be caused by a leaking heart valve, this can lead to a different interpretation for different horses. It might be highly significant in a race horse, but may not be very important for a lead-rein pony. In both cases, the abnormality should be recorded on the report, and discussed with the buyer. However, it may be considered insignificant for the pony and a risk for the race horse. It may be that the vet recommends not buying the race horse, or only buying it if an in-depth heart examination can be carried out and indicate that it would be safe and not performance-limiting for the thoroughbred.

On the other hand, consider two horses with a slight lameness after flexion test. One is a high level competition horse that has a continuous and exemplary record, whereas the other is a young unproven horse. It is likely that this slight abnormality may be interpreted differently by your vet in both

cases. The experienced horse may be deemed suitable, whereas the young horse could be a risky purchase. In both cases, insurance on certain legs may be hard to obtain.

### **To fail or not to fail**

Ultimately, a vet in this country is required to pass or fail the horse. More correctly phrased the horse is either deemed to be suitable or unsuitable for the intended use. There is a lot of discussion amongst vets whether this should be up to the vet. In many countries, the vet supplies purchasers with a risk assessment of the health status of a given horse. This gives the buyer the information to decide whether or not they wish to risk investing their money in a given horse. As it is the buyer, and not the vet who pays, this may be a better way to do things.

Consider a very talented horse that has a few issues with swollen joints. Every vet will consider these a risk. One vet may find the risk low, and pass the horse, whereas another vet may find it a medium risk and fail the horse. Are these vets wrong? Probably not, they both have a different risk aversion. The first vet may often drive their car close to the speed limit, whereas the second one may like to drive well within the limit. On the other hand, the first vet may have been advising a client who has already had to retire two horses with joint problems. This client was investing all their savings in this one horse that should last them a long time. The second vet may have vetted the horse for a professional owner who saw an opportunity to buy a cheap horse with bags of talent. The owners may have liked to interpret the same findings differently than their respective vets. As it is they who are handing over the money, it is their risk assessment that should dictate whether or not to buy?

### **...And finally**

If you are a sensible person considering the purchase of a horse, you will need to surround yourself with good advisors. Your vet should be one of those advisors. Explain your experience with horses, your intended use and your risk aversion. Your vet should be able to help you with a standard vetting and tailor-made interpretations that are highly relevant for the use you want of the horse and the type of owner you are.

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