

“So You’re Buying a Used Car... Or Is That A Horse?” By Barbra-Ann King

The mileage is just right. So are the make, model and year. The colour is beautiful and there aren’t too many marks on it. After trying it out, you realize there is nothing wrong with it, so you buy it.

Congratulations! You just bought yourself a horse!

A group of people shopping for a good horse spent the weekend at an annual horse sale watching horses go through “hoops” -- friendly gymkhana competition, trailer loading, etc. The seller advertised all the horses as “bombproof,” which is attractive to those who are inexperienced riders or new to horsekeeping, or both. These people do not necessarily notice the seller wearing spurs or the expression on the horse’s face when the seller rides them. Even if the horse is not moving away and seems to lack facial expression, an experienced horseperson (or someone who is “tuned in” to horses) will know this may mean the horse doesn’t dare move. The horse already knows it has to be submissive to the dominant seller, or else. The jingling sound made by the spurs reminds them, very clearly, what will happen if they choose to be resistant. So they stand quietly, obeying every demand as quickly as possible to avoid feeling the sharp metal against their flanks. They are submissive horses, with no joy in their eyes, and they have a deep mistrust of human beings.

For the people buying these horses, all this probably doesn’t even cross their minds. They like what they see and they are willing to pay the price to own it. Pay the price they will.

When these horses arrive in their new homes, they are usually given a little down time to settle in. It’s the start of a new relationship and everything is different -- the environment, herd mates, living area, food and handlers. The horse needs to know who the leader is in order to be safe. Keep in mind that safety is the most important thing on a horse’s mind, not food. Knowing who the leader is means knowing who has your back. During the first interactions with

our new horse, we often allow subtle, undesirable behaviour because we want our horse to feel welcome. We may be nudged, nearly stepped on, or pulled around by our horse so he can eat grass. But our horse is new to this place and to us, and we need to be tolerant, right? Wrong.

The day arrives when we decide to ride. Although the horse moved around when we slapped on a saddle, he calmed down afterwards; we ran him around the round pen before getting on, just to make sure the buck was completely out.

After the first couple of rides, our horse starts to be lazy and is slow in responding, so we put spurs on. After all, that’s how he was trained. He still moves around during saddling, but we fix that by yanking the lead shank and yelling, “Quit!” Picking up his feet is also an issue, but we figure that it’s not a big deal and will go away eventually.

One sunny day, we decide to take our horse for a trail ride. He is a little stubborn getting into the trailer, so we quickly slam the door shut behind him. He is a little jumpy when we arrive at the meeting place, but we figure it is because of the trailer ride.

After a while riding on the trail, we start relaxing because our horse’s head is down. Then, out of the blue, he bucks as if he is possessed. He just doesn’t stop, and we land hard. Our horse runs back to the trailer, leaving us behind. Why did he spook? Where is the dead broke horse we bought at the sale?

The short answer to this question: Our horse doesn’t see us as a True Equine Leader, so he doesn’t trust us. He takes over leadership, making the right decisions for himself, which

includes getting rid of the weight on his back that may be detrimental to his own safety.

A horse will follow and trust the leader in his herd. If we are willing to learn the proper skills, he will trust and follow us, both on the ground or under saddle. Being a leader that our horse can trust does not involve any form of dominance. Causing pain, fear or discomfort will never earn us the position of True Equine Leader, but instead will make our horse fear us. We may get our horse to obey us, but it won't mean he sees us as a leader.

If you are shopping for a horse, please educate yourself and don't assume that everything the seller says about the horse is completely true. Find a professional to work with you -- someone you trust, are comfortable with, and whose methods you approve of. It will be well worth the time and money you put into it.

If you already bought a horse that is now having behavioural issues, don't give up. In my career rehabilitating horses, there have only

been two horses that I was unable to help. Both had neurological disorders based on abuse, causing them to have unsafe and unpredictable reactions. Find someone to help you with your horse. Instead of making assumptions about your horse's behaviour, educate yourself about why he acts the way he does -- that will help your horse trust you and see you as a partner that is willing to listen. That's really all they ask of us.

Enjoy the journey!

Barbra Ann King is an internationally known horse behaviourist, founder of the Relationship Riding method and a published author living in Alberta, Canada. She travels year-round sharing her passion with like-minded horse owners, specializing in horses with behavioural issues. She also offers video consultations for trouble-shooting through her website www.relationshipriding.com. Get in touch with her via email at barb@relationshipriding.com.

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