

The pre-purchase EXAM



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There are moments in the life of a horse rider that are problematic by default. One of these is certainly the purchase of a horse, because there are many different aspects to take into account when buying a horse.

There are hopes, for example, to improve performance, to obtain better sport results or just to enhance comfort during walks and get more rewards.

For these reasons, the choice of a new horse entails decisions on economic, technical and health aspects.

Riders are often responsible for deciding on all three aspects, but when it comes to the health one, they can rely on the advice of their trusted veterinarian, who can assess the health of the potential purchase.

So the pre-purchase exam provides support in a very important moment in the career of a rider and must therefore meet as many of the buyer's requirements as possible. Working very closely with the veterinarian can help in this sense.



Clinical visit

In the “classic” pre-purchase exam, the veterinarian gives a motivated judgment on the horse’s health. This judgment is expressed following a clinical visit that consists of two separate phases, the “general objective exam” and the “particular objective exam”.

In the first instance the horses are given an overall assessment, taking into account all the information available on their history, provenance, everything that might have left a mark on their body or, in any case, on their general reliability and residual potential. In other words, the veterinarian carries out an “anamnesis”, a technical term indicating the collection of information. Unfortunately the information available is often very scarce, because the seller and/or the buyer do not always know the horse for sale and, alas sometimes, they deliberately refrain from providing information that might, rightly or wrongly, lead the assessor to advise against the purchase.

Subsequently the horses undergo an accurate clinical check of the entire body, including the cardio-circulatory system, the respiratory system, tendons, ligaments, main joints, digestive and reproductive system. Once a positive overall judgment has been given, the particular objective exams goes more in-depth in the checks of organs and apparatuses, which are the main reason for the purchase. A very accurate exam of the reproduction system is compulsory for the purchase of stallions and mares, a check of the gait and a careful analysis of the legs is fundamental for the purchase of sport horses, and so on.

Ancillary exams

The clinical check alone is not enough to clear any doubt, even though it provides extremely important information

that in many cases helps the veterinarian form a judgment. If the clinical judgment is not enough, it becomes necessary to carry out more detailed checks. In order to do so, it is often necessary to have important equipment, hence the need to have the most significant checks performed at specialized centers or to work very closely with these centers. If, for sports horses, radiology tests of the main joints are nowadays a routine exam, we can now suggest a scintigraphy or bone scan, which can reveal problems that cannot be easily detected. The absence of disabling diseases can be ascertained through the test of a sample of blood or of other biomaterials. Through a specific blood test it is possible to rule out the risk that the horse undergoing the check might be under the effect of anti-inflammatory medicines or of painkillers.

In other words, the pre-purchase exam is one of the chances that veterinarians have to display their entire professional training.

Cost-benefit ratio

There is no doubt that a detailed exam increases costs and, more often than not, leads to a delay in obtaining the final judgment.

For this reason it is important to use good sense. It is therefore worth identifying an adequate cost-benefit ratio for each horse, so as to provide sufficient guarantees for the buyer without incurring in too high a cost. For example, it will be highly unlikely that a would-be walking horse will undergo a scintigraphy, because the cost of this test would be disproportionate to the purchase cost. Conversely, purchasing a potential champion without an in-depth radiology test of the front and hind joints would be an unjustified risk.

Rider-veterinarian cooperation

From this point of view, it is important for a would-be buyer and the veterinarian to work together. The former should not simply be a spectator of the check but should promptly answer the questions and queries asked by the veterinarian, which will enable the latter to provide a check that meets as much of the actual needs of the buyer as possible. It is pointless, for example, to tell the veterinarian that a stallion brought for a check will be used for his athletic or breeding ability, or for both. Or even if he will be castrated by the new owner. What is important is that the veterinarian is told what the rider is expecting from his new horse, because this often steers the pre-purchase exam considerably.

In a good pre-purchase exam buyers must moderately make their voice heard, so that the veterinarian is aware of their actual needs. It may sound banal, but if this information flow works, we can avoid those situations where a veterinarian is considered too meticulous (or too expensive...) for providing a better check which was not in the intentions of the buyer or when a veterinarian is accused of being too superficial because he/she did not deem it appropriate to carry out complex and costly in-depth checks on the basis of a very low purchase price.

Limitations of the exam

Something that must be borne in mind in any case is that, no matter how accurate, the pre-purchase exam has some objective limitations: it is just a "snapshot" of the horse's health status, of a particular moment in time, which does not tell us what might objectively happen in the future. A practical examples will help here too. A horse that only does very light work at the seller's stud and is then sold to the

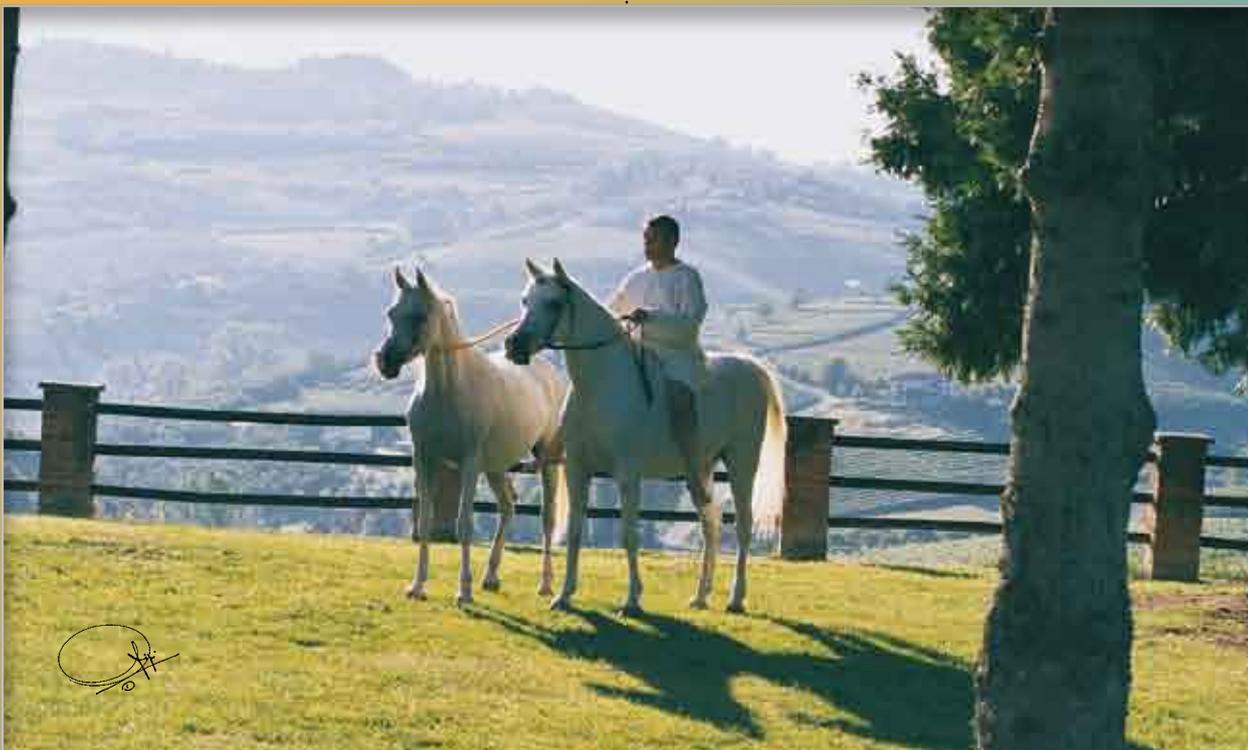
new owner who submit the animal to more intense work is exposed to some risks: in this case unwanted accidents cannot be averted simply by a pre-purchase exam, what is required is an accurate management. Once again, it may sound banal, but if the newly purchased horse responds well to the exercise, there might be the temptation to push him more and take advantage of the magic moment.

On the other hand, the fact that horses are "rejected" during a check due to a clinical doubt does not necessarily mean that their career is over. The most striking example is Varenne, which was rejected just before his extraordinary adventure began.

So what should one do? On the one hand, the old adage that goes "crazy are those who purchase to cure" is always topical, so buying a horse with a real problem is certainly not advisable. On the other hand, the sophisticated techniques that technology makes available to us before buying can highlight flaws that do not lead (and, in most cases, will never lead) to clinical problems.

The cooperation between buyer and veterinarian plays a role here too: in this area full of "grey nuances", i.e. when the situation is neither white (exam successfully passed) or black (horse is rejected), the two parties must agree on the level of risk the buyer is ready to take on, depending on how much buyers like the horse or how high their expectations are.

Among the limitations of the pre-purchase exam is also worth mentioning the fact that this exam does not necessarily lead to a purchase – the agreement is, in fact, between the seller and the buyer. A not-too-favorable outcome of the exam often leads to a renegotiation of the price, but then the agreement is concluded anyway. In some cases, the buyers fall in love with a horse so much that they "pass over"





of the horse for the work they will be subject to, taking into account their conformation and gait. In everyday practice, this evaluation is usually made by a technician who supports the buyer as much as the veterinarian. So far so good. But this figure is not always present and the buyer relies on his/her own ability to judge (often a proven ability). However, the emotional aspects tend to undermine the objectiveness of the judgment because – we all know – horse's men are driven by passion (luckily for them and for their horses), not always by objectivity. In these cases a second opinion can be useful. Another typical situation is when the expert is the seller himself. There is nothing wrong with this

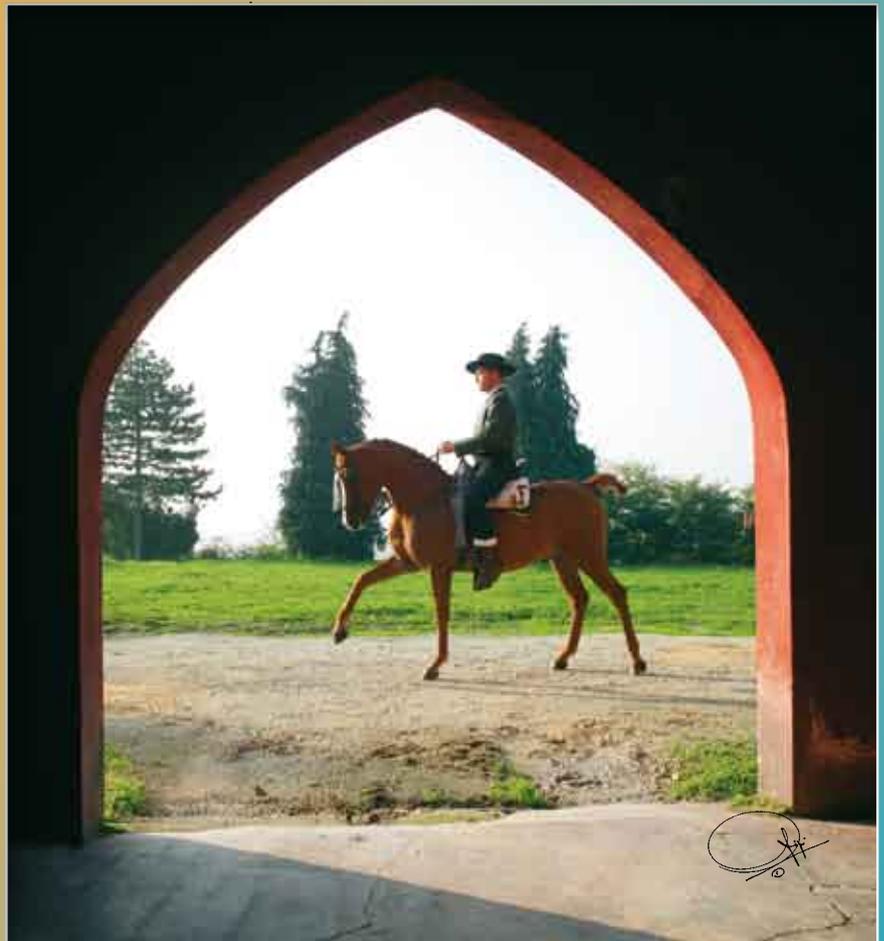
the defects detected, provided that they can enjoy the object of their affection for at least one or two seasons.

“In my opinion, today...”

Veterinarians too are well aware of the limitations of a pre-purchase exam. And they have coined a phrase that perfectly suits this situation. At the end of the exam, even when no problems have been detected, the veterinarian issues a certificate that states, “in my opinion, today, the horse is good”. This is all one can say within the limits of the checks carried out. It is not a waiver of responsibility, but an honest admission of the boundaries within which this professional procedure is performed. Besides, a detailed description of the exam and its outcomes is annexed to the declaration, so that the buyer can evaluate all the reasons for or against the purchase.

Indirect support and morphological-functional assessment

It is also worth noting that the skills of a veterinarian are often not fully exploited during the purchase process. The technical aspects are not the only ones that are relevant and that can be judged by a trained expert. On request, the veterinarian can also provide an opinion on the suitability



either, and sellers are often the best advisors. But in order to protect the seller, it is good practice to get a second opinion so that if future results should fall below the expectations, the seller will not be considered entirely responsible. □