



Picking A Partner (Part One)

with Joe & Jimmie Wolter

by Patti Hudson

Joe Wolter and his wife, Jimmie, don't raise as many horses as they once did, so lately they've had to do some shopping in order to stay well mounted. "There's lots of good horses out there for sale," Jimmie says. "It really helps if you can narrow down what you're looking for."

A young horse certainly is appealing. Not only is the price often more affordable, if you plan to start it yourself you may get to enjoy one of the most rewarding experiences a horse owner can have. Starting a colt, helping it accept a saddle, being the first person to ride it and guide it through so many dramatic changes is both exciting and gratifying.

"People take a lot of pride in starting a colt themselves," Joe says, "I just hope they think about it first. Decide if the risk is worth the reward. Sure, the potential for injury is greater with an inexperienced rider. Still, even the best cowboys aren't immune to getting hurt."

But Joe believes there's more than just physical risk involved.

"Besides the danger to the rider, we need to consider the horse's future. Those first days or months of early handling and riding are important and it's easy to inadvertently create problems that could compromise that horse's potential. How a colt is started will affect that horse and the people who ride him for the rest of his life."

Of course we've all heard the old adage about green riders and green horses. Joe's experience conducting clinics for the last 30 years tends to support the notion that it's often not the best combination. "But there are no absolutes," he says. "The people who make it are the ones who recognize their responsibility to the horse. They seek help, and they understand that for it to work out for the horse, time just can't be a factor."

Before you start looking at horses, take a good look at yourself. Make an honest assessment of your skills; define your expectations for the horse, the time you have to devote to riding, and what your ultimate goals are. Be willing to get help.

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Whether it's a colt or an older horse, issues can crop up. "Go get some guidance from someone you trust, someone whose horses look the way you want your horse to look," Joe says.

“Be realistic about your abilities and how often you’re going to be able to ride,” Joe says. “If you’re a weekend rider and you picture yourself loping off into the sunset on Saturday, you’re going to need a horse that can be okay with not being ridden for a week or more.”

If that’s your situation, then Joe recommends looking for a more seasoned horse. “You probably don’t want to get a three-year-old, although it’s really not the age so much as the experience and what the previous owner has offered the horse. It all comes back to how he was started and how he’s been handled.”

Should your goal be to advance a horse to a higher level of training, then you’ll want to start with the right material. Regardless of the riding discipline or what job the horse is expected to perform, it takes a great deal of time and effort to get to the point where he’s ready, willing and able to do whatever is being asked of him. You want to be sure the horse is of sufficient quality to warrant that sort of investment.

If you plan to show, then the right material also means the right bloodlines. “To win today you’ve got to have the best bloodlines and a horse that’s as sound as you can get,” Jimmie says.

She explains how cow horse people say it’s all in the genes, yet you don’t need to go any further back than the grandparents. Look for popular bloodlines that are currently producing winners in the events you want to compete.

With a wealth of experience in the show ring, Joe and Jimmie both know it takes training as well as breeding. “If you haven’t really done much showing, you might do better with a horse that has the training and experience to help you learn,” Joe says.

Entrance fees, cattle charges and all the other costs associated with showing can make it a pretty expensive undertaking. A win now and then can sure help ease the sting. Whether you want to make it a profession or pastime, a well-educated horse has a lot to offer.

Once you find a horse you’re interested in, besides the basics like age, sex, size and breeding, you’ll want to ask about the horse’s overall health, whether he’s ever been lame or had joint injections and if he has any vices like cribbing. Also ask about his training; when he was started and by whom, how much he has been ridden, and

what he has been used for. If the horse has been shown, you can go to the breed association’s website and verify how many points the horse has earned, along with the show record of parents and grandparents.

Knowing yourself and what sort of horse will most likely make you a good partner will certainly help narrow the search. The next step then is to go take a look and a test ride. “It really helps to have someone you trust and respect to go with you,” Joe says. “They might see things you miss and ask questions you might forget.” Plus, Joe adds, it’s helpful to have someone to bounce your thoughts off of and to help you maintain objectivity. In part two of “Picking a Partner” he and Jimmie talk about just that and how they go about evaluating a horse they’re considering.





Picking A Partner (Part Two)

with Joe & Jimmie Wolter

By Patti Hudson

In Part One of this article Joe and Jimmie Wolter talked about how to narrow the search for a horse by first making an honest assessment of your horsemanship skills and defining your goals as a rider. With that understanding, the Wolters say you'll be better able to evaluate any horse you're considering and determine if the two of you are right for each other.

In this second part of *Picking a Partner* Joe and Jimmie explain their horse evaluation process, which begins with observing the horse in its normal environment. "We don't want the seller to already have the horse saddled, warmed up and waiting for us," Jimmie says. "If it lives in a pasture or stall that's where we want to see it first, so we can watch the owner catch it, halter it and bring it out for us to look at."

The Wolters watch how the owner approaches the horse and how the horse reacts. "Does the owner have to sneak up on the horse or does he stomp right in there? That will tell you a lot about what the horse has been living with," Joe says. "We bought a horse not too long ago that seemed a little uncomfortable with how he was being handled. But if you looked in his eyes you could see a softness there that showed how good-natured he was. It's really their nature you're buying."

Joe bought the horse knowing he had something he could work with. "I like to see how much better I can get one. If it's basically a kind horse, then I just have to work on letting his nature come out."

In addition to studying the horse's nature, the Wolters also use this time when the owner is interacting with it to size up the horse's looks. "I like a pretty head, with big, soft eyes and a kind expression. I want a refined neck with a trim throat latch; good withers; a short back; straight legs with good bone and hooves; nice low hocks; a straight tail carriage," Joe says. "I want something that's athletic, built to stop and work a cow. If I have to give up anything it would be size. I don't need a 16 hand horse."

They'll ask the owner to lead the horse around, trot him, pick up his feet and maybe even load him in and out of a trailer. While this is going on they'll ask any questions they haven't already asked about the horse's health and training history. They find it helpful to work as a team with one person asking questions while the other observes what might be taking place with the horse.

If everything checks out, and the horse has the looks and seems to have the temperament the Wolters are looking for, they'll ask the owner to ride it, provided the horse has been started and ridden before. This gives them a chance to see how the horse handles a rider, how it moves and what it's like away from any other horses it might be attached to.

After the owner has ridden it, if the horse still seems to be a good prospect, then Joe will ride it. "I want a horse that's easy

to move and has a lot of life right on the surface," he says. "I like something with a lot of feel."

But when Joe buys a horse, he isn't just buying it for himself. The Wolters often offer horses Joe has ridden and trained for sale. "When you're buying a horse that may be resold at some point, you have to consider what the horse might be like for next person. So you want something that's sound and good-looking, but above all you want kindness," Joe explains. "You can change a lot of things about a horse, given enough time, but you can't change his basic nature."

While the Wolters don't always have a vet check performed, they do think it can help in the decision process. No horse is perfect, but a pre-purchase examination can tell a buyer what any defects mean in terms of the intended use for the horse. "It's a good idea," says Jimmie.

Once the horse is yours, regardless of age or training, issues may crop up. "A lot of times people think the horse has changed, when really the issue was probably there all along and they just didn't see it before," Joe says. That's why the Wolters find it so beneficial to work as a team when horse shopping. "You're going to miss things, especially if you haven't bought a lot of horses. It really helps to have someone with you that can help you catch things."

