

Conformation and Other Factors

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In choosing a horse there is no substitute for experience either acquired or 'borrowed'. If a vet is involved, so much the better, but always find one who is objective and independent of the seller. The key is to find a horse that is suitable for both the rider and its purpose.

Without a sound horse you have no horse, so in the selection process **Soundness** is vital – don't buy a horse which already has soundness problems as you can be sure to encounter enough along the way!

When it comes to **Conformation** there are really 10 sections of the horse to consider, in addition to **Colour**, (which should never be bad, but while chestnut mares have dubious reputations some can be brilliant) and **Type** (meaning the horse should be uphill and balanced and not be on their forehead, where they hit the ground too hard to survive the rigours of training and competition).

- **Head** should be well-formed and intelligent with a big open eye, which is the first thing one looks for.
- The horse should have a **Good Front** with the head and neck in proportion and the head must sit correctly on a long rather than short neck.
- In **Body** the back should be short but not too short, and the chest and rib cavity should be deep.
- **Tail** should be set well up the hind quarters and swing freely from side-to-side.
- **Quarters** should have plenty of width and strength.
- **Hocks** must be strong and well set, as competition horses put great weight on the hind legs and hocks (look out for **Thoroughpins** – soft swelling on the inside or outside of the hock; **Spavins** – bone enlargement on the side of the hock; **Curbs** – a bony enlargement at the back of the hock. These all spell weaknesses, though a false curb may be acceptable.).
- **Front legs** should not be light boned nor back at the knee. The knee itself must be strong and flat and the pastern neither too short nor too long.
- **Feet** must be well-formed, matching and not too small, flat or upright.
- **Wind** must be clear and sound. A vet will confirm whether a horse has been 'hobdayed' or worse still 'tied-back', which are both operations to the larynx aiding air flow.
- **Teeth** must meet correctly and be in reasonable condition. The teeth serve as an accurate way to check the age of the horse.

Beyond Conformation the prospective buyer should look for a horse with good natural **Movement**, while the horse's **Temperament** is almost as important as its soundness. Finding a horse with real natural **Talent** is something of an immeasurable, but look for a horse with potential. Don't be afraid to **choose a horse in the rough**, often preferable to buying a dealer's horse, turned out beautifully, which could be masking a problem or flaw. Identify any **Stable Vices** upfront, be that **Weaving** – where the horse moves from side-to-side, shifting weight from one foot to the other; **Box Walking** – where the horse walks endlessly round the stable; **Wind Sucking** – where the horse takes in air while sucking or biting the stable door; or **Crib Biting** – where the horse bites on the door or other items in the stable. These can all adversely affect the condition of the horse. Finally, there is **Price** which will be related to age, experience, breeding, health and success. This must be related to affordability, both the initial cost and the cost of training, maintaining, producing and competing.

In conclusion, remember 5 things:

1. There is no certainty that a horse meeting all the conformation points and other criteria cited is going to become a show-jumper or eventer but might be suited to dressage and/or showing.
2. Choosing a horse cannot be an exact science, gut feeling plays an important part in the decision.
3. If you find the 'ideal' horse at the right price, don't miss it!
4. No horse is absolutely perfect; the importance is to know the problems and defects up-front.
5. Even if you have bought the ideal horse if you can't ride it, it will never fulfil its potential.