

Lesson 3: Conformation and Selection

Selecting a horse is somewhat like buying a car. Everyone wants four good tires, no major flaws in the body, two working headlights, good air intake, a sound motor, and a solid exhaust. Of course, the emphasis placed on a particular characteristic can vary, depending on the owner's needs and skill level. A draft horse is not suitable for someone with limited means to feed it, for example, just as a large, high-strung horse is not appropriate for a child.

Characteristics of a Good Horse

In general, the horse should be healthy and of normal weight. There should be no outward signs of disease.

Gender – After the class and breed have been selected, gender is the next decision. There are five choices: mare, stallion, gelding, colt, or filly. A mare is the adult female and can be a good pleasure horse or can be used for breeding. The stallion is an adult male and can also be used either as a pleasure horse or for breeding. However, a stallion can be more difficult to work with and frequently will not be the best choice for a pleasure horse, especially for a beginner. A gelding is a male horse that has been castrated and cannot reproduce. Geldings make very good pleasure horses because they do not exhibit any of the aggressive breeding characteristics that a stallion will when around mares. Colts are young male horses, and fillies are young females that have not foaled.

Leg structure – The next category to consider when buying a car is the tires; with a horse, it is the legs. Leg structure is very important. The leg should be straight and well muscled. If the horse has any defects in leg structure, problems can develop with the pastern, knee, shoulder, or hip. These problems can make the horse unsound to ride.

When looking at the chest, the ideal front legs are shown by drawing a straight line, perpendicular to the ground, from the point of the shoulder to the tip of the hoof on each leg. The legs would be in two identical segments from hip joint to hoof. Toes should point forward.

From behind the horse, find ideal hind leg structure by drawing imaginary, perpendicular lines from the points of the hip to the ground behind the heels. The line makes two equal halves, as with the front legs.

The head and muscles – The horse should have adequate muscling for its breed and a well-shaped head. It should have large, wide-set eyes that are bright and alert. A horse that has small eyes is likely to have poor vision and be easily spooked. Large, wide nostrils permit proper air intake. If the horse has small nostrils, it might not be able to breathe properly when asked to run or work hard.

Teeth – Deformed or poor teeth can cause weight loss and poor conditioning. This can lead to other problems, such as colic, impacted bowels, or in extreme cases, even death.

The teeth are the best indication of a horse's age. This is because teeth develop at different ages and wear at a certain rate, which can be correlated to the horse's age. Foals develop temporary teeth at about 4 weeks of age, starting with the front incisors. By about 9 months of age, all of the temporary teeth are in. At about age 2, permanent teeth replace the temporary teeth, starting again with the front incisors and working around to the back. Temporary teeth are whiter, smaller, and cup-shaped, while permanent teeth are off-white and more rectangular in shape.

It takes about 4½ years for all the permanent teeth to come in. They will all have a black area on top of the teeth, which wears off with age. At age 7, if the horse has not had its teeth floated (filed), a spot known as the seven-year hook will develop on the inside incisor. By the time the horse is 8 years old, all the black has worn off, and at age 10, a groove will appear on the inside incisor. As a horse further ages, the teeth wear and slightly protrude.

Because of the wearing of the teeth, it becomes necessary to float the teeth (file them) to keep sharp edges from developing that would cut the gums and make eating difficult and painful.

Equine Science

Temperament

A horse should have a good temperament; it should not be jumpy or aggressive. Many times, temperament problems are associated with such characteristics as small eyes, poor eyesight, or some other structural problem. Remember, a horse with a poor temperament (bad attitude) can cause many hours of problems or even injuries.

Balance and Soundness

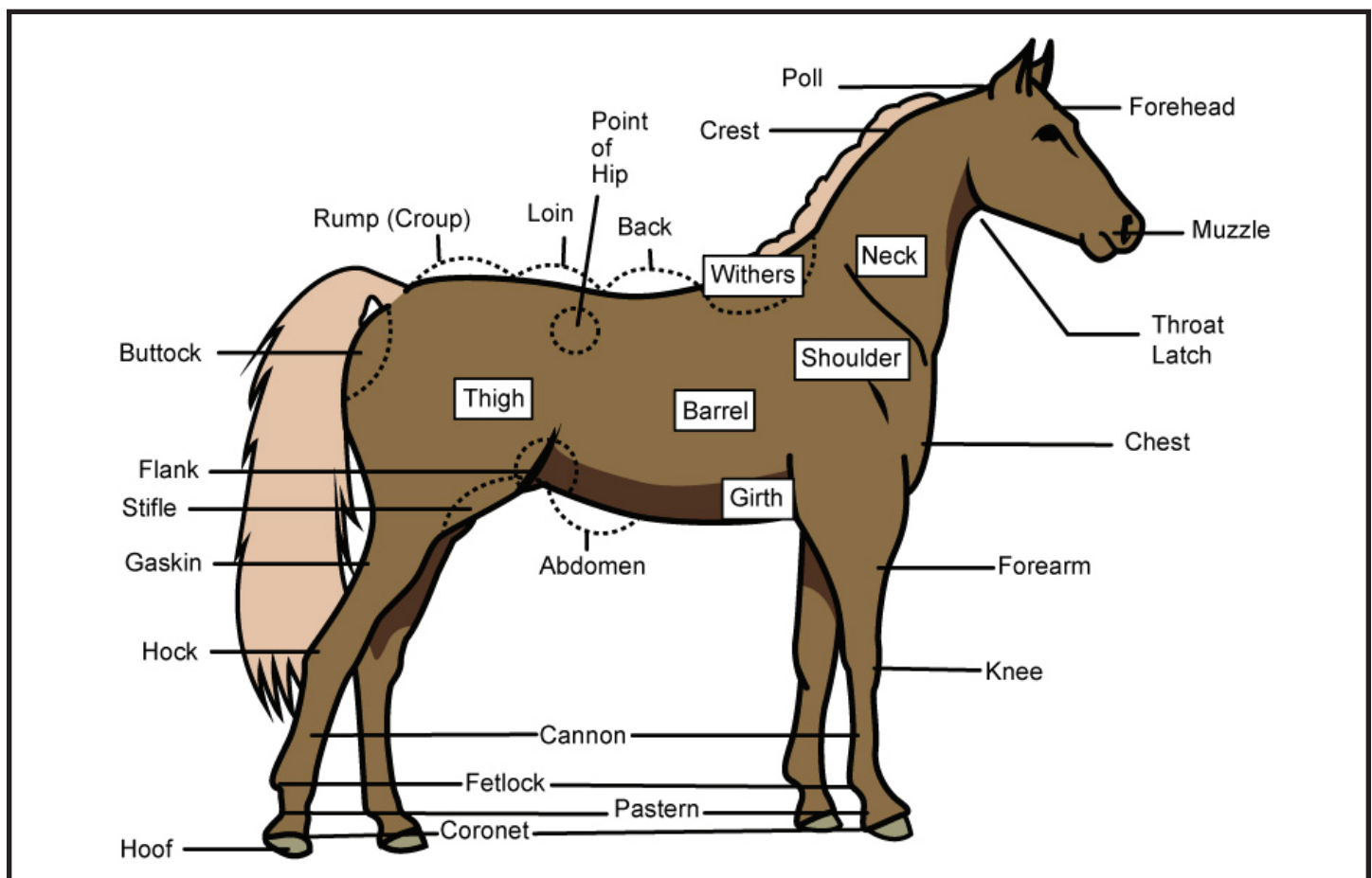
If possible, ask the veterinarian to look at the horse for internal problems or structural defects.

Balance – The horse should be properly proportioned. The head should not be too small for its frame, nor should the neck be too long. If the horse does not have a good balance to its body, it can be prone to stumbling. (See Figure 3.1 for parts of a horse.)

Soundness – Buying a horse that is unsound can cause problems in the future. The horse might appear to be all right, but as it ages, the defects can progress to a point that the horse will no longer be sound enough to ride. Some slight blemishes, however, might not cause any problems at all; they may be mere imperfections in appearance that do not interfere with performance.

In general, structure can be broken into two categories—blemishes and unsoundness. A blemish is something that does not interfere with the horse's performance. Anything that interferes with the horse's ability to perform makes it unsound. An unsoundness can be an inherited trait or it can be caused from some outside influence such as stress, strain, injury, or nutritional deficiency. Some minor defects, such as in travel or gait, can be corrected by shoeing.

Figure 3.1 - Parts of a Horse



Disreputable dealers can disguise defects. Always buy from a reputable owner who is willing to allow a veterinarian to examine the horse.

Performance Records and Pedigrees

Performance records – These records can be a great help when selecting a horse, especially if the horse will be used for breeding. Because of inherited genetic characteristics, the ancestors' performance can be a gauge of how well the offspring will do. The Thoroughbred breed registry was the first to use performance records. This registry recorded pedigrees of all horses that won important races, which is often recorded on the horse's registration papers.

Pedigree – A pedigree is simply a record of the horse's ancestry, which is often recorded on the horse's registration papers. It is much like a person's family tree. It is used to look back in time to find out which horses were bred to sire certain offspring. Pedigrees are used in conjunction with performance records to help predict how the offspring might be expected to perform.

Even more important than the horse's pedigree is the breeder's reputation. Look for breeders who will stand behind the quality of their animals.

Summary

To get a horse with desirable traits, attention must be given to the horse's conformation or makeup. Buying a horse is much like buying an automobile; if component parts are not well inspected, the buyer might end up with a lemon.

Credits

Ensminger, M. Eugene. *Horses and Horsemanship*. 6th ed. Danville, IL: Interstate Publishers, Inc., 1990.

Hawcroft, Tim. *The Complete Book of Horse Care*. New York: Howell Book House, Inc., 1994.

University of Missouri-Columbia Extension Division
agricultural publications

- a. G2840: Unsoundness and Blemishes of Horses: Feet and Legs
- b. G2842: Determining Age of Horses by Their Teeth
- c. G2843: Leg Set: Its Effect on Action and Soundness of Horses