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Pre-Purchase Exams

Buying a new horse can be an exciting time for a horse owner. A great deal of time, money, and emotion is often invested in the search for a new horse. Once you have found a horse that fits the disposition and training level you are looking for, an exam performed by a veterinarian can provide valuable information about the horse's physical ability to achieve your goals and help you determine whether to proceed with the purchase.

The goal of a pre-purchase exam is to discover any physical abnormalities the horse shows at the time of the exam and to discuss with the potential buyer how these abnormalities may affect the horse's health and performance in the future. It is helpful to have as much detail as possible about the horse's intended use, previous use, and medical history.

A thorough physical examination is performed to evaluate the horse's general health. This may include evaluating conformation; auscultating the heart, lungs, and abdomen; taking the horse's temperature; examining the eyes; checking the teeth; evaluating the back, limbs, and feet for any abnormal heat, swelling, or pain; and checking the range of motion of the neck and limbs.

Additionally, a soundness evaluation is performed, which involves assessing the horse's movement at different gaits in a straight line and circling in both directions. Flexion tests are performed to help identify subtle changes that might otherwise go unnoticed during a gait evaluation. During a flexion test, the veterinarian holds the limb in a flexed position for a set period of time and then evaluates the movement pattern as the horse trots off. Underlying joint and/or soft tissue injuries can sometimes present as lameness while completing this test.

With the information gathered during the exam, the veterinarian might then recommend additional diagnostic testing such as radiographs (x-rays), ultrasound examination, endoscopy, or bloodwork. If the horse's intended use is for breeding, a breeding soundness evaluation is recommended. Information from these tests can be used to provide further detail on relevant examination findings and give the veterinarian and buyer more information to determine the serviceability of the horse for his intended use.

As veterinarians, we too often encounter situations where we diagnose a problematic health condition or lameness issue shortly after a horse is purchased. This is always disheartening for both the owner and the veterinarian. Some of these situations could be avoided if a pre-purchase exam were performed. While it is impossible to predict the future, a veterinarian can often identify current and/or potential problems the horse might have and help you make an informed decision about your purchase.