

QUEST for the Holy Grail

Or, how to find a great
amateur's dressage horse

BY AMBER HEINTZBERGER



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“Most adult amateurs want a horse that is easy to handle, goes on the bit, and is comfortable to sit,” says dressage trainer and USEF “S” judge Jennifer Roth, of Carmel, CA. “The horse should be an appropriate size for the rider and needs to be quiet—or quiet enough—depending on the amateur’s confidence level.”

Roth has just described what the majority of the dressage market is looking for. Yet finding a sound, safe, sane equine partner can feel like the quest for the elusive Holy Grail.

If your search for such a horse has you feeling like a Monty Python character, facing down man-eating rabbits and the Knights Who Say “Ni,” take heart: We have gathered advice on surviving the dark forests of unsuitable mounts and finding the amateur dressage horse that makes you always look on the bright side of life.

In One Word

Movement, talent, conformation—all of these take a back seat to temperament in determining whether a horse is a suitable mount for an amateur rider.

Roth sums it up: The ultimate amateur horse is “forgiving.”

Forgiving, to USDF Fourth Level certified instructor and Instructor Certification program faculty member Ann Guptill, means: “The amateur horse should be sensitive to the aids without being overreactive in case the rider makes a mistake. He needs to be able to ‘take a joke’; that is, when the correct sequence of aids is given, he responds correctly, but if the incorrect aids are given, he does not get upset or confused. Horses that get frustrated by mistakes are not ideal for the amateur, learning rider.”

Like Roth, Guptill, who teaches and trains at her Fox Ledge Farm in East Haddam, CT, considers temperament her primary criterion for an amateur’s horse. “Other shortfalls can be overcome by a horse with a good temperament,” Guptill says.

You might be a sucker for a horse with an “in your pocket” personality, but a good temperament means more than sweet-natured friendliness. According to Guptill, the ideal amateur horse is aware of his environment without being overly fearful of new things—an attitude she describes as “wanting to go see the flower pot that blew over rather than run away from it.”

Like many horsemen, Roth believes one can learn a lot about a horse by looking at his eyes and his expression. Big, soft, kind eyes and a calm expression are encouraging signs.

“That’s especially important for an amateur because you don’t want a timid or a skittish horse,” Roth says.



ALL SMILES: Adult-amateur rider Melinda Hamilton, a student of Ann Guptill’s, competing at Prix St. Georges on her fifteen-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding, Picardi

A good amateur’s horse doesn’t necessarily have to be “bombproof,” but he should probably lean toward the level-headed end of the spectrum. Rule of thumb: The less experienced the rider, the more quiet the horse.

You Make My Heart Sing

Professionals ride the horses they’re paid to ride. Amateurs have the relative luxury of choosing their mounts. To keep you coming back to the barn day after day with a smile on your face, choose a horse that inspires you and whose talents and skills are suited to your riding goals, advises instructor/trainer Angelia Bean, a USDF bronze medalist and USDF “L” program graduate.

“After a long day at the office, shuttling kids to practice, and keeping house and home, having a horse that the rider wants to ride is key,” says Bean. “Otherwise it’s too easy to put other things before their personal goals.”

Amateurs’ equestrian goals can be as varied as the breeds of equines that reside at Bean’s Straight Forward Dressage, Glenmoore, PA. Her students of all ages, ranging from beginners to FEI-level riders, train and compete (or not) on everything from ponies to big warmbloods.

“One thing I do know about the type of personality drawn to dressage is that goals are important,” Bean says. “But those goals don’t need to be about the ribbons. It is better if they are about reaching training goals. Even if my students compete, I insist they have goals other than competition itself, as competition has far too many variables to use as a barometer for your training or your sense of self.”



A DIFFERENT ROAD TO ROME: *The FEI-level Morgan stallion Statesman's Eclipse, owned by Ensign's Grace Farm (MD) and ridden by Angelia Bean, helped convince some of Bean's students to consider breeds other than warmbloods*

Narrowing the Field

Before you start paging dreamily through the sales ads, decide on a general age, height (most average-sized adult amateurs do well on horses around sixteen hands, Guptill says), and price range. Sketch out a picture of your ideal horse: How much training should it have? Are you seeking a specific gender?

This would be an excellent time to have a heart-to-heart talk with a knowledgeable professional—ideally, your regular instructor. Most pros stay abreast of the horse market and can tell you what your budget will buy. And the honesty needs to go both ways: A frank assessment of your skill level and any issues will go a long way toward ensuring that you wind up with an enjoyable mount and not the “he’s too much horse for me” scenario. Be realistic, Roth advises.

A horse that has already been successful with another amateur—especially if he has the show record to prove it—earns points with Roth because he’s a known commodity.

Does It Have to Be a Warmblood?

One of the persistent beliefs among dressage riders is that warmbloods are the only “real” dressage horses. As proof, they point to such statistics as the warmblood-dominated Adequan/USDF Dressage Horse of the Year annual standings.

Bean wondered whether the conventional wisdom is true—and decided to test it for herself with what she refers to as “the dressage experiment.”

“I wanted to know if the ‘warmblood advantage’ was created by amazing genetics or by the better training that most warmbloods receive,” Bean says. “I met a Morgan stallion, Statesman’s Eclipse, that met all of the criteria of a dressage horse—active hind leg, uphill movement, good mind—in a non-warmblood package, and talked his owner into letting



SUCCESSFUL MATCH: *Trainer Jennifer Roth found Settino for owner/rider Laura Cooper (CA) in 2003 as a four-year-old. They’re shown competing at Intermediate I in 2009.*

me develop him to FEI. For mostly financial reasons, I had developed several non-warmbloods to Third Level, but I wanted to see if this horse could go all the way. Since he was ten when he made the career switch from combined driving—not a great idea, by the way—we set our goal of Prix St. Georges, and he made it. And now I have the opportunity to repeat my experiment on BR Danny’s Secret, an Arabian/Friesian cross, who is currently making a great showing at Third Level.”

According to Bean, her dressage experiment opened some students’ minds to considering other breeds. “Since they have seen my progress with Eclipse and Secret, they were willing to consider non-warmblood breeds; and because of these horses’ lower purchase price, it often leaves more budget for training and showing,” she says.

First Visit and Test Ride

You’ve identified a promising sale horse and made an appointment to see him. Use our experts’ suggestions to help formulate a list of things to check out.

Observe carefully as the seller handles the horse on the ground. “Poor ground manners can really be a problem,” says Roth. “Some horses are harder to handle on the ground than under saddle. You spend a lot of time on the ground with a horse; you don’t want to get hurt, and you want to enjoy yourself.”

Ideally, the horse should stand tied quietly and accept being groomed and tacked up with a minimum of fuss. If anything strikes you as odd, ask questions. A note pad can be handy for jotting down anything you want to discuss privately with your instructor later.

Next, Roth takes a good look at the horse's conformation. "You want a horse with harmonious conformation—not a really long back or a short neck. You want a horse that will be able to go up to the levels you want for that particular rider. Some riders don't want to go past Second Level, while others might want to do Prix St. Georges."

Most sellers will then ride the horse, showing what it can do. If at any point you decide that the horse isn't Mr. or Ms. Right, politely say so and end the visit. You don't have to give a reason. If you're unsure about getting on, ask your instructor to ride the horse next and use his or her assessment to guide you.

If you like the way the horse goes and you want to try him, start by assessing the way the two of you fit together. Do you feel comfortable sitting on him?

"His barrel should be of a shape that the rider's leg lies nicely on it. The rider should not feel that he or she needs to draw the leg up to find the horse's sides. The horse's back should fit a saddle well and should not be so wide that the rider's hips are spread to the point of discomfort or such that the rider isn't able to give correct and timely aids," says Guptill.

"I watch the rider's body language as they interact with the horse, both on the ground and in the saddle," says Bean.

"I will also watch the horse's body language. When it's a good fit, you can see it in everyone's face and body language."

Photos and video can be useful in reviewing the horse trial. If you can, bring a friend along whose job is to wield the cameras, thereby leaving you and your instructor free to concentrate on the horse.

An experienced rider may enjoy a young or green horse, but most amateurs benefit from the well-trained "schoolmaster" type, Guptill believes.

"This horse will recognize the correct aids when given and will respond correctly," Guptill explains. "The best schoolmaster type will do exactly what he is asked—not more, not less. When the aids are put on correctly, in the correct place and order, he will follow them."

Wowed by big, lofty movers, some amateur riders have learned the hard way that all that movement can be hard to manage.

"It is easier for most riders to ride a smaller mover more forward than to stay with the movement of a bigger horse," Guptill says. And that's not necessarily a disadvantage if your goals include competition: "A classically ridden, 'up-hill' horse is far prettier to watch than a horse that is held back in its movement for the rider to stay in balance." ⇨

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Did We Mention Getting Help from a Pro?

According to Roth, test-riding the horse (as opposed to buying sight unseen, such as from a video) is an especially important part of the selection process when the buyer is an amateur. Her advice: If you are unable to ride the horse yourself, or if you want to have a more experienced rider try the horse first, consider hiring a reputable professional.

"If the horse is far away or you can't do it yourself, it's worth having a professional ride the horse," says Roth. "Give them a laundry list of all the things you want checked out. Now that I'm older and more cautious, I'll have my assistant get on and try horses that I'm not comfortable sitting on. I'll ask her to do specific things with the horse, and then we'll talk about it. Most amateurs don't know enough to judge for themselves after one ride whether a horse is right for them."

Roth stresses that especially in Europe, where horses are often professionally prepped for sale, amateurs may be impressed by the presentation only to have things unravel after they get the horse home.

"Somebody has to be smart and savvy enough to know what they are dealing with," Roth cautions. "Maybe the horse is hard to collect, but the professional rider is so good that they

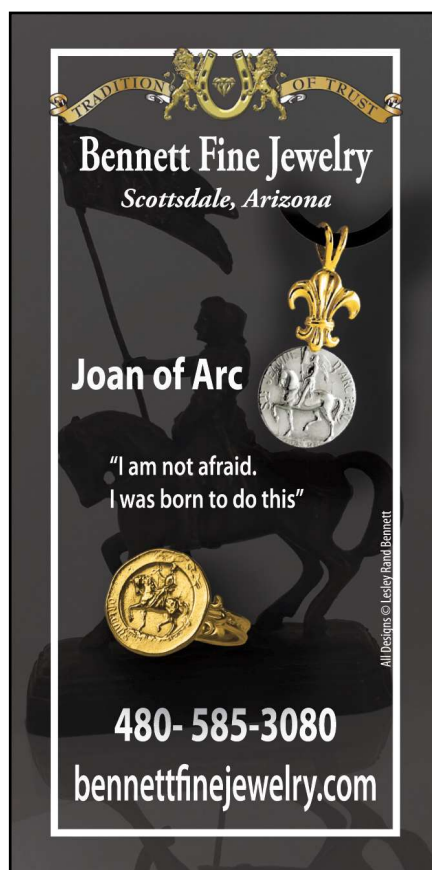
can make the horse very light on the aids and together. You ride it that once, and he appears easier than he would be when the amateur rides him on a daily basis. The horse might stay nice in the long term if a professional rides it all the time, but most amateurs want a horse that *they* can ride all the time."

Avoid These Horse-Shopping Mistakes

In Bean's experience, adult amateurs' most common pre-horse-buying mistake is failing to be honest about the amount of help that will be available to them.

"If the perfect schoolmaster comes along but he needs specific shoeing, do you have access to someone who excels at corrective work? If you purchase a young warmblood, do you have a trainer with experience with young warmbloods? Developing a dressage horse takes a team, which can consist of coach, vet, shoer, massage therapist, dentist, saddle fitter, chiropractor, et cetera. Without these resources, it's easy to get frustrated," she says.

Emotions also can get in the way of good decision-making, Bean says. She offers this advice for keeping a level head: "When my students start shopping, I recommend they make a list of what they want to do with their dream horse. We start from there, instead of with color, age, or breed. Let



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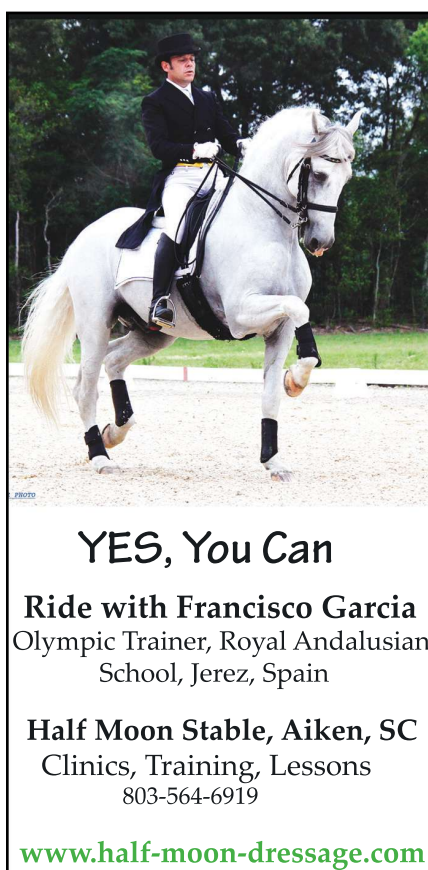
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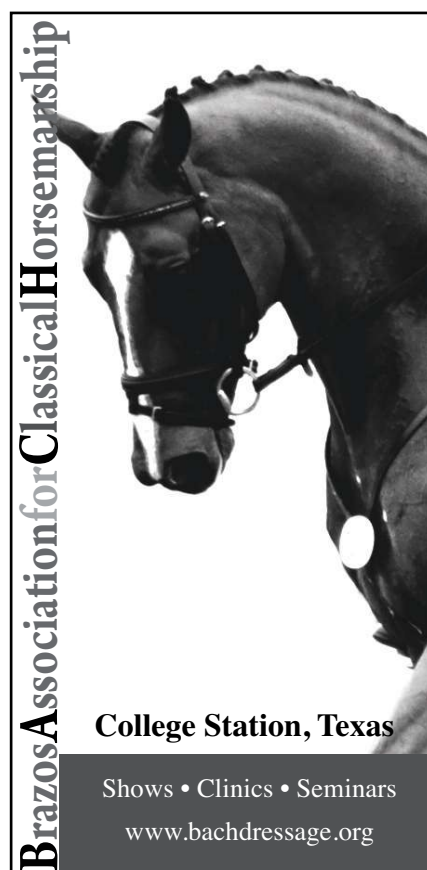


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When you horse-shop, don't make the "house poor" mistake—you know, mortgaging yourself to the hilt such that you can't afford to furnish the place, our experts advise.

With a new horse, some extra lessons and training might help your partnership get off to the best possible start. Especially if you select a horse that will need regular professional tune-ups, make sure that the funds will be there to keep the training going. If money gets tight and you have to cut back on training, small problems could develop into big issues.

form follow function. If I suspect the student could get sentimental, I suggest they make a list of all of the things they didn't like about their last horse, to keep on hand if they try to purchase a horse just like the one they are selling"

The "dream horse" list can also serve as a handy reality check if a hard-luck (but clearly unsuitable) case tugs at the buyer's heartstrings. "Falling in love with stories about the horse's past or feeling sorry for the horse are poor deciding factors," Bean says.

Three more of Bean's "don'ts": Don't buy a horse you have to pay for over time; don't buy a horse you have to "fix"; and don't buy a horse with scars, as they tend to be accident-prone. (However, she adds: "I own one horse that I broke every single rule on, and would do it again in a heartbeat!")

A Good Horse Is Never a Bad Color

"People who will not consider certain colors of horses really limit their options," says Guptill. And yet some buyers insist on such superficial criteria, or won't consider a mount over a certain age or of a certain breed.

A horse is a major purchase. It's time-consuming and, yes, somewhat emotional. But a trusted adviser can help keep your heart from ruling your head.

As Guptill puts it: "The important thing is that the horse needs to be easy to live with and not have a lot of handling limitations. He should cross-tie well, lead well, and so on. The amateur horse should be easy to be with and rewarding to ride." ▲

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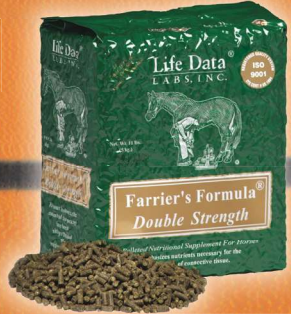
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