

Adopt a Rescue Horse - What You Need to Know

Doing your research before you adopt a rescue horse can help you avoid trouble and find a suitable match.

By Sue Pearson Atkinson

FROM
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Adopting a horse is tempting in so many ways. If you're the emotional type, you've saved a life. If you're the practical sort, you've saved a lot of money on purchase price. And if you're both kinds of horse enthusiast, isn't this a great idea?

Not so fast. Unless you do your homework, taking in a horse from a rescue facility (which places otherwise "unwanted" horses with new owners) or from any other "free" source could spell trouble or even disaster.

We'll tell you how to proceed with caution, getting your head and your heart together for what could be the most wonderful equine adventure of your life.



These good-looking horses are waiting to be adopted at the Grace Foundation of Northern California. This rescue facility just east of Sacramento uses a numbered scale to rate horses' temperament and rideability to match them up with appropriate new owners.

A Different Kind of Horse

Beth DeCaprio runs the Grace Foundation of Northern California, a highly organized rescue operation just east of Sacramento. She says her rescue and many others are seeing a different kind of surrender situation now than in earlier years.

"We're seeing not only horses that people don't want, but also horses they can no longer financially care for," she explains. While rescues around the country still have many older, starved, and sick animals, they also have something new: healthy, well-cared-for horses that owners simply can no longer afford.

Jill Curtis runs the Shiloh Horse Rescue and Sanctuary in Las Vegas, Nevada. During the last seven years, she's found good homes for 313 horses, and at any given time there are up to 75 unadoptable animals in sanctuary on her ranch. She, too, is taking in more healthy, sound horses with great potential. Jill says some of her best rescues come from the racing world when Thoroughbreds are cast aside after their careers have ended. She finds them new jobs.

For example, she found Pacific, an OTTB (off-the-track Thoroughbred), for her sister Sarah, and the two are now eventing at the preliminary level.

Jill and Beth offer the following guidelines for a successful adoption, organized into three important checklists. Begin with yourself.

Your Wants, Needs

Think through your motivation and goals for adopting a horse.

- What do you want—a mount for casual recreational riding? Something you can compete on? A pasture pet to be company for a horse you already own? Obviously, your answer will affect the breadth and depth of your search, as well as what you can expect to pay in adoption fees (more on that in a moment).
- What's your skill level with horses? Are you experienced enough to work through the trust issues that come with a neglected or abused animal? Can you work with a young, unstarted horse?
If you haven't ridden since childhood or are new to riding and/or ownership, a quiet, serviceably sound senior horse will be a better choice. (You'll be doing no horse any favors if you take on more than you can competently handle.)
- Do you have a suitable place to keep a horse (or a second horse) and enough money for feed, hoof and veterinary care, and other maintenance? True, your new horse might cost you only a nominal adoption fee to acquire--typically from around \$200 to \$600 for a rehabbed horse, though a specialty breed with training could come with a fee of up to \$2,000 or more. (And some rescues waive the adoption fees in special circumstances.) Still, as with all horse acquisitions, it's the ongoing maintenance costs of the animal that are your true expense. So, any way you look at it, put the notion of a "free" horse out of your mind.

Consider The Source

Your self-assessment is done, but before you begin looking at specific horses, check out the rescue organization that's offering them for adoption.

- Is it a registered non-profit? If the rescue has 501(c)(3) status, it means the operators have gone through some extra work to define and run their business. There are no regulated industry standards, and not all rescue centers are well run, so it's worth knowing whether the proprietors have at least gone to this effort.
- Does the rescue rehabilitate horses from neglectful or abusive situations before trying to place them with new owners? It should. If it doesn't, you might wind up bringing home a special-needs horse that requires a demanding regimen to be brought back to good health.
- Are you being pressured? Back away from any attempts to hurry you into a decision. The best rescue operators want the adoption to succeed as much as you do and will spend the time it takes to make sure you find a suitable match. Again, adopting a horse is a huge responsibility, financially and emotionally. Take the time it takes to make a prudent decision.

- Can you return the horse if it doesn't work out? A good rescue will allow you a time period for settling in together and will take the horse back if you feel you've made a mistake.
- Does the rescue have good references? Find others who've adopted from the facility you're considering and ask them about their experience during and after the adoption process.

The Horse in Question

You've found a facility you can trust. Now apply equal diligence in checking out any horse you're considering for adoption.

- Spend plenty of time with the horse while it's still at the rescue. Ask about handling issues and whether the horse has any behavioral vices. If you're looking for a rideable mount, have someone at the rescue ride it for you before you mount up. (If they won't, there's very likely a problem and you probably shouldn't try to ride it, either.)
- When you find one you think might be for you, arrange for a health exam (vet check). Without one, your wonderful "bargain horse" can turn into a heartbreaking money pit. "This is a top priority," stresses Jill. "Horses with navicular disease, ringbone, and a long list of other disorders could look and seem fine, but their hidden health problems can turn into huge vet bills." For this reason, the lack of a vet check is the most common cause of a bad experience with a rescue horse.
Some rescues have their horses examined by a veterinarian when they take them in; others don't. Either way, you'll want a vet you trust to check the horse before you take him home. You won't necessarily need expensive x-rays, but you do need a basic, overall health assessment.
- Expect to sign a contract if you do adopt. Most well-run rescues will require one; be sure to read it carefully and fulfill your promises regarding your new horse's care, handling, and potential future transfers of ownership.

Dealing with Unknowns

What won't you know about your new adoptee? It depends on where the horse came from originally. Because there are more horses being relinquished these days by conscientious but financially stressed owners, you could learn a fair bit about a horse from this type of situation. Feel free to ask questions and inquire about registration papers.

Horses coming from abusive or neglectful situations, however, don't arrive at the rescue facility with much information about their history, so you won't be able to find out much. Fortunately, in such a situation, a well-run rescue operation can take some of the guesswork out of the deal.

For example, to help her make good matches, Beth at Grace Foundation has put solid evaluation techniques into practice. She and her staff use an in-depth behavioral assessment to learn about each horse they take in, then they rate the animal on a 5-star scale.

Horses that score a 5 can be considered safe for a beginner to ride. Horses with a 4 rating need an advanced beginner to intermediate rider. (Beth and her staff are also skilled at evaluating the

people looking to adopt, to make sure a new owner's skills match the needs of the horse being adopted.)

Horses that score from 3 down to 1 have challenges to overcome. For these horses, the Grace Foundation donates the adoption fee to a professional trainer, who works with the horse and the appropriately skilled rider in an effort to get them off to a good start.

Straight From the Owner

Although a good rescue facility will give you a real advantage in finding the horse you seek, such operations aren't the only source of no-cost or low-cost horses. An owner might be going away to college and more interested in finding a good home for a beloved horse than earning money in the transaction.

Or someone in need of a break from the cost of horse care might gift a horse, temporarily or permanently, to someone offering a good home. Broodmares might need to be culled from a breeding program, or young horses might need expensive training owners can no longer afford.

Increasingly, online horse classifieds are including "free horse" listings (see many examples at Equine.com--plug "\$0 to \$0" in the price window of the search function). Here, you'll see many horses that five years ago would've been in the ubiquitous \$1,500-to-\$2,500-horse category. Now, such animals often are offered for free, because much of the buyership in that range has become an "adopter-ship" instead.

Bear in mind, however, that you'll still need the experience and/or the financial resources to provide any needed training if you're looking for a horse you can ride. Without experienced rescue operators to help you, ask for the help and advice of a horse-savvy friend, or pay to enlist the support of a professional in your search.

Matches can also be made through bartering--that is, trading one horse for another with no money changing hands--but, again, experience is key. If you don't have it, get help.

Happily Ever After?

So, what are the real-world results of taking on a rescued or otherwise "unwanted" horse? Here are three stories from people who took a chance on a free or fee-only animal. Learn from their experiences how to maximize your own prospects for creating a great new equine partnership.



In California, twin sisters MJ and CJ sit confidently on their mounts as foster dad Mike Roberts looks on.

Two thumbs up. Californian Mike Roberts isn't an experienced horse person, yet he wanted to make sure his two foster daughters had safe mounts with good temperaments.

"I didn't know what to look for, so it was important to have help from someone who was horse savvy," he says.

Mike's first horse came from the Grace Foundation, where he got the help he needed from founder/director Beth. She knew what Mike was looking for, and also knew that the twin girls, MJ and CJ, had some Pony Club experience.

A sweet Appaloosa mare named Shiloh turned out to be a perfect fit. She'd suffered severe neglect but was coming along well in Grace's rehabilitation program. When Beth assessed the mare's ridability, she discovered Shiloh had some solid training in her background, and a match was made.

The second horse Mike acquired for his girls came from a trade.

"This time we dodged a mistake by having an experienced friend come along," reveals Mike, who initially had answered an ad to trade a mini for a full-sized horse. He had the mini, but the horse on the other end of the deal turned out to be an unstarted 2½-year-old filly--an unsuitable choice for people with limited horse experience.

Mike's friend helped negotiate for a different horse at the same location--a sturdy 10-year-old Quarter Horse gelding with miles of ranch work and trails behind him.

The result? Mike's now happy to see his girls with reliable mounts for trail rides and local schooling shows. CJ and MJ are enjoying their equine friends while learning about commitment, responsibility, and leadership--not to mention the value of giving a worthy animal a second chance in life.

Emotion, high; results, low. But it's not always thus. Combine lack of experience, a disreputable owner or facility, and unrealistic expectations, and you have the perfect recipe for a sour deal. That's what Ohioan Sue Steiner learned when she started her journey with rescue horses 17 years ago. She had suitable living quarters for a horse, plus the desire to help one in need. What she didn't have was much knowledge or experience.



As a result, she let her heart rule her head when she saw a staked-out, dejected looking horse in a field. Feeling sorry for the horse, she contacted the owners; when they told her the animal was "a perfect kids' horse," she took them at their word.

In Ohio, Erin Steiner has show-ring aspirations for Darcy, a 5-year-old Incentive Fund-nominated Quarter Horse mare.
Photo by Sue Stein

She now knows that the fact the people wouldn't ride the horse for her should've been a big, red flag. And, once she got the horse home, she discovered that not only was it not a kids' horse, it was so difficult as to be suitable for only the most experienced of handlers.

Exceeding expectations. An older, wiser, and far more experienced Sue recently had a much different experience. She acquired an Incentive Fund nominated Quarter Horse mare from a rescue organization she'd thoroughly researched. And 5-year-old Darcy is turning out to be a quiet, willing treasure. Sue's 18-year-old daughter, Erin, hopes to compete with Darcy in Western pleasure when they're ready.

No one knows why the young mare was passed through one auction to another and then to a rescue in Pennsylvania. "I think she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time," says Sue.

So, with careful attention to your checklists, you too can make a winning match. You won't necessarily come home with a potential show champion (although it can happen!), but you will have saved money, saved a horse, and started a wonderful new relationship.

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