

TRACY GANTZ



ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS

Before You Adopt

With many horses in need of homes, adoption is often an attractive alternative to buying; however, it requires a serious human commitment

Pearl was “a skeleton with skin” when Jennifer Aumer, DVM, first saw the Paint mare in Minnesota in 2003. The primary veterinarian involved in the rescue of several horses that year, Aumer connected with Pearl through the course of the horse’s rehabilitation and adopted her. Eventually, Pearl showed off a wealth of talent and has developed into a fabulous mount for Aumer, her husband, and their 7-year-old daughter.

Several states away in Oregon, Kim and Troy Meeder turned what was originally a two-horse rescue into the 25-30-horse Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch in 1995. Primarily using horses they have rehabilitated from a variety of neglect and abuse situations, the Meeders host some 5,000 children a year at the ranch. Many of the children have physical, mental, or emotional challenges, and the chance to bond with a horse brightens the youngsters' lives.

Aumer and the Meeders discovered what others like them are finding across the country—that rescuing a horse in need can reap incredible rewards. The keys to success, however, are patience and understanding each horse's health and management requirements.

Adoption is not the right choice for everyone. For instance, someone looking for a horse to ride or show immediately would likely better meet his or her goals through normal horse-purchasing channels.

But those considering adoption have plenty of options. They might want to provide a home for a horse that has been neglected and abused. They might want to find a second career for a former racehorse. Some even adopt a mustang from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

Each option carries specific challenges. A neglected horse might require special care to return to full health. A former racehorse

could need rehab for any lingering injuries and likely will require retraining for his next job. A mustang will necessitate complete training, from getting used to humans to learning to wear tack, carry a rider, and follow physical and verbal cues.

"I think a person considering adoption should put some forethought into what problems they are willing to live with," says

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KIM MEEDER

Julia H. Wilson, DVM, Dipl. ACVIM, of Turner Wilson Equine Consulting LLC, in Stillwater, Minn. Wilson also serves on the board of the nonprofit Minnesota Hooved Animal Rescue Foundation (MHARF).

Adoption Policies

Each equine adoption agency approaches the adoption process slightly differently. Wilson advises prospective adopters to examine organizations' policies before taking on the responsibility of a horse. "Figure out what the fine print says in the adoption contract," she says.

The MHARF, for example, does not allow you to sell the horse you adopt. That might seem a disadvantage and certainly would not work for someone who wants a young horse to train and sell at a profit. One advantage, however, is that if you find you can no longer keep the horse, the MHARF will take it back.

Adoptions from some organizations resemble a normal sale, while adoptions from others can be something in between.

New Vocations, an Ohio-based racehorse adoption program, has placed more than 3,000 Thoroughbreds and Standardbreds into new homes since 1992. Its adoption policy requires an application approval process, and the program's initial contract with the adopter is for one year. During that time the adopter cannot sell the horse, but he or she has 60 days in which the horse can be returned for a full refund of adoption fees. After a year, the horse can change hands.

"The reality is that most people keep the horses way over a year," says Anna Ford, program director for the New Vocations facility in Marysville, Ohio. "But they feel like they have an option this way."

New Vocation's policy works well with former racehorses that usually come off the racetrack in good health without abuse or neglect problems. Some need time and veterinary care to recover from a racing injury; others simply need retraining for a new job. Hunter/jumper and eventing trainers often develop healthy, sound former racehorses into talented show horses, Ford notes.

Most reputable rescue facilities will ask for an application and information about how and where you plan to keep the horse. These horses might have experienced abuse and malnutrition before the organizations stepped in, and the groups want to ensure the horses will end up in a healthy situation. In that light, they might require follow-up visits to your facility after the adoption.

"These horses need fairness," says Kim Meeder. "Probably the overriding issue we see with horses that come to us and are broken in their mind is a broken trust. This horse has been taught by one person after another, 'I cannot trust you because you are not fair.' We have to start at very ground level sometimes with trying to replace negative experiences with very positive experiences.

"It's like cogs in a wheel," she continues. "It's something that needs to happen in somewhat of a systematic fashion. We



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evaluate them—what does this horse love, are they bold or shy, are they gregarious or quiet?”

Agencies usually keep a horse for a period of time to overcome any severe health or mental problems and to evaluate what job might suit the horse best.

“These agencies have gotten an animal in need through the worst of it,” explains Wilson. “They usually don’t put them up for adoption until they’re ready to go, which I think is the right way to do it.”

New Vocations keeps its horses an average of two months. When the horses arrive, caretakers give them time to acclimate to their new surroundings and feed. Up until their retirement, racehorses typically require a high-energy diet because of their level of athletic performance. During the transition period to a lesser amount of exercise, New Vocations adjusts the horses’ diet slowly and strategically, sometimes using a feed higher in fat to help them gain weight as they lose some muscle tone. After this diet adjustment is complete, horses are ridden two to five times a week, unless an injury precludes it.

“When they go up on our website (for adoption), they can walk, trot, canter, and go both ways around the arena,” says Ford. This trainability makes for a more adoptable horse.

Choosing an Agency

Look for a reputable adoption agency before zeroing in on a particular horse, preferably an organization that has been in business for a while and has a good track record. You can usually find information about a rescue facility on its website, including its adoption policies and the types of horses it offers. But don’t stop there. Ask questions of those in charge and of people who have adopted from the group. Be sure the agency has legal ownership of the horses.

“Sometimes animals are just in foster care for a while until the sheriff, the lawyers, and everybody else gets done with deciding whose horse it actually is,” says Wilson.

Once you are comfortable with the agency, you can work with its personnel to find the horse with abilities and temperament that

fit what you hope to eventually do with it. You’ll likely discover that the adoption facility staff members want to find the perfect match as much as you do.

Get to Know the Horse

The Meeders have taken in horses from a variety of situations. They currently have a Hurricane Katrina survivor on the ranch as well as an Arabian that was shot in the head twice and survived in the Cascade mountain range wilderness for two weeks. Due to the horses’ varied backgrounds,

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DR. JULIE WILSON

experiences, and trust levels, Kim Meeder recommends spending time with a prospective adoptee to be sure you and the horse are a good match.

“This horse may have unique needs that

you might or might not be able to provide for,” she says, needs that can be determined and discussed at this point of getting to know the horse with the organization’s help. “As much as we are able to give horses homes of great longevity, we are doing them a favor when that’s a good fit.”

Wilson also suggests finding out as much information about the horse as possible. “Just as with any other new horse coming into your life, it makes a huge amount of sense to get a veterinary opinion on the horse’s current health,” she says. “Find out if it has problems that are a) manageable and b) that you’re willing to put the time and money into managing.”

Be honest with yourself about the care you can give the horse. Aumer adopted Pearl from the MHARF after the horse had gained 100 pounds. But even at this point Pearl still required very specialized care, something an equine veterinarian like Aumer could handle.

Because Aumer didn’t have suitable cold-weather facilities to house a horse such as Pearl, she kept her nearby at her father’s barn for the winter. The family saw to it that Pearl received good-quality grass hay as part of her weight gain regimen. Ultimately, Pearl regained her full health, and Aumer was able to turn her out in her pasture with another horse.

She and her family began riding Pearl and discovered they had adopted a horse with a great deal of training that was equally comfortable on the trail and in the show ring with both novice and experienced riders.

A former racehorse, on the other hand, might be a handful for a beginning rider. Ford says people who adopt from New Vocations usually have considerable riding experience or take lessons with someone who can also train the horse.

“These horses really aren’t good for a beginner at this stage of their lives,” she said. “Five years down the road, it’s a different story.” Thus, Ford will sometimes steer a less-experienced rider to other outlets.

No matter where you get the horse, establish a good working relationship with a veterinarian who can guide you through health issues and preventive methods such as deworming and dental care.



Work with agency personnel to find a horse with abilities and temperament that fit your needs.

“Would-be adopters should try to find out as much as they can about the previous life of the horse (healthwise),” Wilson says. “A horse who never got dewormed could have internal damage from strongyles. The rescues always deworm them as soon as they’re strong enough to be dewormed, but knowing that they had a really heavy worm burden when they came in would be a little bit of a red flag.

“Also, a lot of times when they come into the rescue, they’ve never had any dental work,” she adds. “Ask if the teeth have been worked on yet, or if the horse going to need more work.”

Take-Home Message

Adopting a horse can be a rewarding alternative to purchase. Evaluate both your own abilities and the adoption agency before zeroing in on a specific animal. Find out as much about the horse’s background as possible so you will know how best to care for it.

“You can often get a really nice horse for a low adoption fee if you are willing to take



A former racehorse, like the one pictured here, will likely require retraining for his next job.

the time to bring them back to health,” says Wilson. Check back next month for the second part of this series, which will address what owners should expect after adopting a horse. 🐾

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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