

From The Bottom Up

Tips For Buying A Young Warmblood

by Saret Tola

Fear of the unknown often darkens our dream of buying the young horse that will become the next show star. Perhaps we are drawn to this idea by the harmony that arises between human and equine when raising a horse from his first years; possibly it's the chance to be able to buy him before he costs six figures. But *will* this charming youngster transform into that fancy show horse we had envisioned? Here is a way to peek into a crystal ball.



Start from the bottom up — your bottom line:

Clearly delineate the parameters of your ideal finished product, setting the bottom line with which funds you have to acquire the prospect. If the boundaries of your search aren't defined when you begin, you can waste too much time "window shopping" looking at unsuitable prospects ending up confused and ultimately frustrated with the process. That said it's always good to be somewhat flexible on the search for your dream prospect, keeping in mind that **'a good horse is a good color.'** This means don't get hung up on details that may seem important now which later will become insignificant. Examples of this are stereotypes about certain coat colors or placing importance on the color of the hair on his legs.

A word to the wise: Usually when the price is too good to be true; there is a catch somewhere! Remember breeding is costly. Quality breeding stock is expensive and not easily acquired. Usually you get what you pay for.

OK, let's 'meet' him before we see him in the flesh!

Here's where we start—at the bottom! More often than not, the influence of the damline is so great the youngster becomes a near carbon copy of his dam. The bottom of the pedigree (i.e. dam's side) is the most important and the first place to see into the future of what this prospect will look like. Ask for a copy of his papers/ pedigree. If the breeder/seller doesn't know the foal's pedigree, especially the dam's line, ask for proof (IE papers and DNA w/ parent verification). If there is no proof of pedigree (especially the dam's)—my advice is run (don't walk) away. Buying a foal of unknown origin is akin to shooting in the dark – you could hit the target but there's 99% chance you won't.

Knowledge is power- research everything you can. Even if bloodlines aren't familiar to you, the info is out there – do the search! Google isn't just for checking out people!! Conversely, ask someone fluent in "Pedigrees" to help. People in the know can decipher hundreds of years of EU breeding wisdom that can be contained in an extended pedigree. In fact, many top EU registries center their entire breeding policies on the mare families or mare Stamm lines. The horse's family tree is a window into that foal's future, a literal open encyclopedia. ***The more proven the damline or mare family, the more certain you are of the quality of her offspring.***

Here are some questions to ask: What mare family does his dam hail from? What else has the dam produced? What has her dam and grand dam produced? Has she been bred to the foal's sire or a relative before? Are there other proven sport horses with a similar pedigree "nick."

Because the Jockey Club is a 'closed' book (meaning no outcross blood comes in; Thoroughbreds are true "blue bloods"), the TB dam commands even more dominance over the genetic equation that is her foal. TBs have historically been culled for breeding on the basis of producing horses that run well at long or short distance (feats which do not necessarily employ a set of physical or mental characteristics that we would choose for sport horses like hunter/jumper or dressage). Therefore, TB dams generally produce less consistently than WB mares of proven pedigree; WBs have been culled for hundreds of years to select characteristics that we strive for in modern riding horses. Due to the fact that most TB pedigrees lack a traceable track in the sporthorse world, gathering all the information you can about the TB dam, but most importantly, her produce before this foal is paramount. Seeing is believing in this instance. Put your eyes on her and her offspring, they are your only crystal ball in this case.

Here's my analogy that makes up the foal: ***the mare is the cake, the stallion is the icing on the cake.*** Sires take too much credit: good, bad or indifferent. Don't allow a mare by a famous sire to blind you into not looking further into her pedigree. Rarely do we find a truly prepotent stallion that imposes as much influence over his progeny as mares do. For me, the stallion is there to compliment the dam's bloodlines ("icing on the cake"). The strength of the dam line holds true in the pedigree of the sire's dam. Again, I suggest to ponder Papa's pedigree, especially his dam's lineage.



LT: Balou du Rouet and RT: his dam's sire Continue (Contender), an example that his dam's sire exerted the major dominance (as it does in Balou's produce)

So if this prospect's pedigree provides promising proof, let's proceed (to meet him in the flesh)!

Form follows function... we want good conformation

Again, let's start from the bottom: look at the youngster on flat, hard ground. Study his legs and feet. Watch him walk directly towards and away from you. This is where any deviation will be magnified. Imagine the plumb line; you don't need to be a leg specialist to see these imperfections. Foals commonly have turned out toes and upright pasterns because as their chests widen, the legs straighten and as they gain mass, the weight gives angle to the pasterns. Remember no horse is perfect but it's good to be aware of him and his current development.

On the right: we see transient upright pasterns as well as the over- developed hind end of 4 mo filly.

The topline goes through its literal ups and downs. But make sure to look at the back separately from the hind end. I've known buyers to erroneously assume an exaggerated "soft" (sagging) back to be caused by an over-developed hind end typical of uneven growth stages. The withers is one of the final parts to obtain its full growth, so if you see towering withers on a weanling, it probably won't get better. Keep in mind that foals 'grow over' their legs while their backs will lengthen. Likewise, foals' legs are disproportionately long and the depth of body will take up leg length as they develop.

The neck especially on a filly or a gelding will commonly appear under developed. Keep in mind that with proper training, the neck muscles will develop. A smooth beautifully connected head and neck (i.e. poll) will remain constant.

The head can go through many changes for the better or worse. In general, the head of a young foal is at its smallest, most proportionate. As a yearling, the head can look too big for the neck. To see what his face will look like later, I study the specific contours of the youngster's features and then look to his dam and sire to find which characteristics he's taken from the genetic gene pool.



When judging his movement or free jump potential, first watch him to see if he is fresh, nervous or tense. If so, you are watching movement or jump that is not normally in the animal. Watch his back – does it look stiff as a board? Is his tail curled like a Pomeranian over his croup? If so, this horse is far from relaxed and not using his back. First time turned out in a new environment will only show you how he moves when he is fresh. First time or two thru the jump chute, you might see a crazy-careful jump that only will exist one or 2 times in this horse's life. Watch as he settles. Does he relax and start using his back or does his "movement" disappear? Pay close attention to what he does in the jump chute after he has a rail or a hard rub. These are the telling moments!

Temperament—Take him away from his herdmates or ask the owner to do so. Watch his body language. Does he become a big bully? Does his 'good nature' fly out the window? Or perhaps he calls a couple times but remains calm. Keep in mind a horse w/ an innate good disposition is worth quite a bit of talent. You can end up with GP potential spinning its wheels in your backyard if only a gymnast can stay on him! And in the end... aren't we doing this to enjoy ourselves and our horses? If we have to have a knock-down drag out altercation each time w/ our horse, the 'fun' drains out real fast.



Don't forget to get a good look at the dam if possible because in 3 years, more often than not, that's what your foal will look like. Look at as many pictures as possible of the dam's foal(s) to watch for trends or common ground that look similar to your prospect.

Finally, bear in mind that horses make liars out of the most honest and knowledgeable horse people. Each and every horse is an individual and won't necessarily follow the 'set' patterns. However employing these ideas will hedge your bet in finding that diamond in the rough!