

The Right One

Looking to buy or otherwise evaluate a weanling? These tips will help you find that gem.

You've got your reasons for having your eye on weanlings right about now. Maybe you're a breeder, as I am, with a built-in interest in knowing how to assess what you've raised. Or, you could be a potential buyer, eager to bring home a young horse you can raise and train as your "forever" partner. Perhaps you're in the market for a show prospect, with intent to resell at some point. Maybe you just enjoy challenging yourself to improve your eye for horses.

The trouble is, a lot of people can't look at a baby and see anything but cute. This occurs with buyers and breeders alike, at all levels of the weanling market. If this is where you are, I'm here to offer a hand.

In the breeding/training business I operate with my husband Roger, I deal with weanlings virtually every day. Not only do we breed, raise, train, and sell our own, we also work with our customers' weanlings, and consult with them on buying and selling. And, because we run a training program designed to give these young horses a great head start on basic skills (learn more at YearlingHeadStart.com), I also get plenty of hands-on, eyes-on experience at finding out how those adorable babies turn out as they mature. This gives me a body of knowledge you can draw on.

IMPULSE PROTECTION

To protect yourself from falling for cuteness (or any other single trait, like coat color or a temptingly low price), establish some initial objectives. These will be your touchstones, helping you to *stay* objective as you look at your own stock, or someone else's. Ask yourself these questions:

Strictly personal, or otherwise?

Are you trying to find a horse you'll keep as a personal partner for the rest of his life, with no plans to ever compete or breed him? Or, are you looking for a prospect you'll eventually show, breed, and possibly resell?

When buying or retaining a weanling strictly for your own purposes, you get more leeway to suit yourself than you do in the other circumstance. You don't have to be as fussy about pedigree, for instance, or about some of the other factors that add show, breeding, or resale value. (More on that later.)

What's your goal, and at what level?

I think it's safe to say that everyone who's looking at weanlings wants to end up with one who'll grow up to be a healthy, balanced, correct, and good-tempered individual. But beyond that, many points of evaluation depend on the goal you have in mind for the horse, and at what level. →

BY ROBIN GOLLEHON, WITH JULI S. THORSON PHOTOS BY ROGER GOLLEHON

All baby horses have a certain level of "cute factor." But cuteness alone isn't enough to guarantee you'll end up with the right horse for your needs.





When you're evaluating a weanling, check to see how he reacts when you push him away from you, or attempt to flex his neck. "The right one" will be accepting. If you desire a level topline for performance events, look for a weanling who has this trait naturally. By observing how he behaves toward other horses, you'll get clues to his personality.

For example, you wouldn't look for the same things in a Western pleasure prospect as you would in a barrel or roping prospect. And you don't necessarily have to be as insistent on eye appeal or quality of movement in a 4-H project weanling as you do in one you'll aim at world-class competition or profitable resale.

What level is your eye?

If you intend to shop unassisted, particularly for a show prospect, the level of your eye—in other words, the level of horses and competition you're used to seeing—needs to match or exceed the level of your goal.

Suppose your goal is to compete in one of next year's yearling longe-line futurities at a major show. If you've only known the weanlings in your neighbor's pasture, chances are, you won't know what to seek, or how to recognize it, in a competitive longe-line prospect. If you've never been to your breed or sport's biggest show, yet want a weanling who could compete there some day, your eye and goal are out of sync. In cases like these, I recommend you get experienced first-hand help.

PEDIGREE POWER

Let's say you've established your core objectives, and have done some preliminary shopping based on that foundation. You've come to me with a list of the weanlings who have caught your eye. (Or, you may want my help in evaluating what you've raised.) Where would we go from here?

My first consideration for each candidate would be, "What does he look like on paper?" To the degree that your budget will allow, you want the close-up relatives on a pedigree to have proven aptitude and ability in whatever it is you want the weanling to be able to do.

Not only does this boost your odds of getting the kind of horse you want, it also contributes to a horse's resale value—critical, if resale is part of your overall plan. The higher you

rank resale as a goal, and the higher the competitive level, the more particular you have to be.

If your goal is event-specific, be careful to select bloodlines that match him. Don't, for instance, buy (or advertise) a pleasure-bred weanling with intentions of making him a halter horse, or vice versa. Horses are specialized now, and such crossovers seldom work out well, either in the show pen or at resale time.

For best resale value, the *first* part of the pedigree (sire and dam) has to do your talking for you. If you have to explain who the sire of your prospect was, because he has no record or name recognition of his own, you've done your goal a disservice from the start. Ditto on the dam, and her immediate family.

Once you get past the sire/dam section of a pedigree, beware of falling for fame alone—especially if the famous-name horses are out at the pedigree's tail end. The seller pitch of "has So-And-So right on his papers" isn't enough to lessen the aptitude risks you take in buying any weanling, and it won't help you much at resale time, either. There are exceptions, but you're lucky if you get one, and you're also taking a bigger buying risk.

It's not just the name recognition that matters. Among professional trainers, who have experience working with numerous individuals from many bloodlines, certain lines are known for producing offspring with certain traits. Some lines are known to be real laid-back, and others are known more for being spooky. Some lines produce more "hot" horses than others, and so forth.

How do you find that out? Well, this is another area where it can really pay to work with a knowledgeable pro throughout your buying process. You'll bring your risk factor down a lot if you do.

TECHNO-SHOPPING

Now let's talk about online horse shopping, and some things

you need to know about viewing weanlings on video. Both forms of technology are great tools for locating weanlings for sale, and for helping you sort through ones you clearly won't want to buy. (You'll know those when you see their images. Something about them will just turn you off.)

That's how I recommend you use these forms of technology—as tools for starting, and then narrowing, your prospects list. I *don't* recommend you use them for making your final purchase decision. I think it's really important for you (or your pro helper) to inspect all your finalists in person. Here's why:

- You can't fully evaluate a weanling's disposition from an ad or video.
- You can't do any of the in-person tests I'll be getting to in a bit.
- You're at the mercy of someone else's photography/videography and editing skills, good or bad. It's relatively easy to alter conformation in a photo, and to edit out negative parts of a video. What you see may not be what you get.
- Videos and online photos can be distorted due to a flawed camera angle or poor lens quality. They can make a horse's back appear excessively long, for instance, or distort the angle of the hocks.

Again, there are always exceptions. People can and do buy weanlings, sight unseen, from photos or videos only, all the time. And some end up happy with their purchases. Just be

advised that if you do take such a step, you'll enter a zone of significant risk. Are you really willing to go there?

IN-PERSON TESTS

Naturally, as you scrutinize a weanling in person, you'll be looking at his overall conformation. A full tutorial on that subject is beyond the scope of this article, so I'll assume a level of knowledge on your part, or that you'll have your experienced helper on-hand to guide you. Once you've ruled out individuals with obvious conformation flaws, continue to evaluate the others with these questions and tests:

Is the weanling balanced? When you look at a candidate in profile, he should divide into proportional thirds. You want to see a long neck, short back, and hips that look like they fit the horse. Balance, dictated by a horse's skeletal structure, is a key component for athleticism, and is an inborn thing. It's something you can definitely evaluate at weanling age.

What do his parents and siblings look like? For indications of what a weanling might grow up to look like, look at as many of his relatives as the breeder can show you. Ask to see the baby's mother and any siblings. If the sire isn't on the premises, ask for pictures. You may be able to see tendencies—including



You can learn more about a weanling by observing him in person than you can from a photo or video. Take note, for instance, of the gaits and speeds he prefers as he goes across the pasture, and see how his preferences match up with your end goal for him. See how he reacts when you invite him into your space.



those you may want to avoid, like club-footedness, or unattractive heads.

How does the weanling carry himself when moving? Like balance, the way a horse carries himself—and this includes high-headedness—is dictated by the conformation he's born with. Unless you have a deliberate reason for wanting a horse that's naturally high-headed under saddle, rule out a weanling that resembles a high-headed llama as he's moving. Look for one with a more naturally level topline as he's in motion.

Which gaits and speeds does he prefer? When at liberty, it's normal for any horse to go from Point A to Point B at the gait and speed most comfortable for him. Watch the weanling as he moves across his pasture or pen. Spot any preferences? If so, how might they affect your goal?

For example, if the weanling seems to want to trot everywhere he goes, or if he can't lope without crossfiring (being on one lead in front and the other behind), he's not your best candidate for events and disciplines that require and are judged on ability to lope or gallop. Likewise, the weanling who would rather mosey along, not going fast at any gait, is a more likely long-line or Western pleasure prospect than the one who goes everywhere at warp speed.

TEAM Horse & Rider

A member of Team H&R, Robin works with husband Roger to operate Gollehon Show Horses in Versailles, Kentucky. They stand outside Quarter Horse and Paint stallions, and raise weanlings destined for the long-line and Western pleasure show pens. In their Yearling Head Start program, the couple assists owners and breeders who want to show and/or market long-line prospects. They also train and show Western pleasure horses and hunters under saddle. Learn more at gollehon.com or YearlingHeadStart.com.

Is his quality of movement appropriate for your purpose? This subject, like that of conformation, is too big to cover in depth here. Not only are there many nuances to what would be considered a "good mover," but those nuances can and do differ from breed to breed, and event to event. Get help if you're in doubt about what to look for.

Where are the weanling and his dam in the pecking order? Some horses are naturally more dominant than others, and generally speaking, they're more challenging to train than those on the more submissive side. When a mare's at the top of the hierarchy, her baby usually is, too.

What happens when you push on the weanling? Assuming the weanling will allow you to touch him, this test will tell you something about his personality. Gently push his body sideways, or place your hand on the front of his face and push rearward. If you get a willing, soft response, that's good. It indicates acceptance. But it's not so good if the weanling insistently resists, by pinning his ears, batting his tail, biting, or making an attempt to rear or kick. These are signs of a naturally resistant personality.

Is he friendly and positive toward humans, or standoffish? Again, assuming a weanling will allow himself to be handled,

scratch him in a place he likes, such as near his withers or the top of his tail. Then walk away a few steps and see if he'll come to you for more. If he will, that's good. We have a baby at the ranch who likes people so much that she willingly does whatever anyone wants her to do. A horse like that is a joy to train. But if a weanling won't come near you after you've rubbed and scratched his "sweet spots," he'll be harder for you to win over.

What does the weanling do when you ask him to change directions in an enclosure, such as a round pen? Give a plus to the weanling who willingly reverses and goes the other way when you step in front of him. Give a minus to one who tries to charge you, attempts to leap out of the enclosure, or turns to kick at you. And beware of owners' excuses for these negative behaviors. Chances are, you're seeing the weanling's true personality.

How has the weanling been raised and handled? It's good if a weanling's had positive, experienced handling and is respectful of humans as a result, but *not* so good if he's been raised like an out-of-control puppy. Don't settle for a weanling who's aggressively disrespectful of your space. He's already been taught he can do anything he wants, and when you start adding rules to his life, he's likely to get upset. A baby who bites, kicks, strikes, pushes against you, or rushes up to try to run you off has been misinformed about what life with humans is supposed to be like!

How's his level of nutrition? As sorry as you might feel for him, don't be in a rush to buy a weanling who's so underfed that he's stunted and bony, or so overfed that he's obese and

displaying obvious joint problems, like swollen fetlocks or shaking knees. A horse can't reach his full potential unless he's had appropriate nutrition and other care, and if you start off behind the curve, you're setting yourself up for trouble.

Does the weanling have eye appeal? Show-ring and resale competition are both tough, so to catch the eye, whether that of a judge or a future buyer, you want "pretty" on your side. Unless your purchase will be for that strictly-personal objective mentioned earlier, be sure you look for a weanling with a pretty head, an elegant profile, and a color and/or set of markings that catch the eye.

Is he healthy and sound? If you like everything about a weanling so far, and your helper (if you have one) agrees, it's time to settle on price, and to have a pre-purchase vet exam performed. By the time you get this far in the weanling-evaluation process, you'll have a much clearer picture of whether the weanling you're considering is the *right* one. ■



Will that weanling's head get prettier as he grows? Will he ever outgrow the "uglies"? Is there an optimal time of year to be looking at weanlings? Robin answers these and other frequently asked questions at HorseandRider.com. Look for "FAQs on Weanling Evaluation." To talk about this story, visit the *H&R* Forum, or e-mail us at HorseandRider@EquiNetwork.com.