

CHOOSING THE RIGHT BARN

by Joseph Freeman

Most people choose a home for their horse based on the trainer's proficiency, distance from home and cost of board.

Many folks don't know what else to look for, but several things affect a horse's ability to thrive. I invite you to look at the other aspects of choosing a good barn.

On the surface, most barns look fairly similar. They all have training areas, tack rooms, grooming stalls, wash racks and hay and bedding storage.

In the past eight years of my practice, I've visited over a thousand barns. As much as they look the same, their personalities are unique.

I work closely with the horses and evaluate their physical and emotional condition. It's easy for me to tell if they're happy or not. After working with numerous horses in each barn, I got a feel for the personality of each place.

This "barn personality" has a direct effect on the level of contentment or anxiety of the horses who live there and that affects their willingness to learn and perform. You can't detect it while you're in it. You have to spend quiet time in many different barns to get a sense of it.

First let's look at what a horse wants:

- * Good food on a dependable schedule
- * To know where he fits on the pecking order
- * A clean safe place to sleep
- * Enough room to run
- * Wide open spaces so he can see predators from a distance

This is fairly easy to provide and most places do.



It's also important that a barn cover the needs of the rider. Happy riders contribute more to a horse's well being than people think.

Why does a rider's peace of mind effect a horse's happiness? Because horses are mirrors. They reflect back what they're surrounded with. When people around them act stressed, horses are on edge. When people around them are calm, horses are more relaxed.

Here are things to consider when you're shopping for a new barn ...

THE HORSES' CONDITION

When you first visit a possible new home for your horse, spend time looking at the horses who are already there. What is their temperament? Do they pin their ears and turn their butts toward you? Or do they come to greet you in a curious and friendly manner? Do they look dull-eyed and bored or clear-eyed and bright? Are their coats shiny? Do they seem happy?

WORKERS IN THE BARN

Conflicts between barn owners, trainers, managers or grooms all take an emotional toll on the horses. Little tasks get dropped, extra attention is not paid where it's needed, tension rises.

Get a sense of the emotional tone of the barn. Do the people in the barn feel pleasant and warm to you? Do they work harmoniously? Do they seem distracted, anxious or even contentious?

THE SETTING

Notice if the barn has visual space around it. If a barn is too tucked away in the woods, horses may be slightly on edge because they are concerned that they can't see predators.

How quiet is the area? Too much noise will spook them and cause stress. One barn I visited was in the woods near a freeway. The horses heard "unseen threats" all the time and appeared nervous and unsettled.

THE BUILDING AND GROUNDS

Your intuition probably told you something when you first stepped through the door.



Does the barn feel oppressive or welcoming? How well lit is the barn at midday? Are the aisles wide and clear? Are the ceilings high enough? Even a small barn can feel spacious, and a large barn without the right proportions can feel claustrophobic and cluttered. Take it into account.

Do the stalls smell clean? Are there sharp objects like nails or hooks where horses can reach them and get hurt? (you know if they can, they will) Are the pastures and turnouts well maintained?

OTHER RIDERS

Spend an hour in the barn yourself. Notice if the other riders blow in, rush through their rides and chores and blow out again, or do they tend to linger and talk and want to be there longer?

Watch how they interact with their horses. Ask yourself if you would want to be in the grooming stall next door to them with your horse.

THE KEY PERSON

In the very best barns there is always one person who sets the tone for the barn, usually the owner or trainer. The primary characteristic of this person is an abiding love for horses and an active intention to continuously improve the health and well being of the animals under their care.

These people are often savvy business people yet their priorities are clear. The horses come first and there's a wide generosity in their spirit around the animals.

When your horse is under the care of someone like this, both you and your horse will feel comfortable and pleased to be there. Speak to this person when you visit. If you don't find someone who fits this bill, look elsewhere.

If the barn you are looking at meets all these specifications, ask yourself if you can see yourself spending hours there each day and not wanting to leave?

This is important because if you have a feeling of comfort yourself, your horse will feel your exhilaration and enjoy your rides more, too. Conversely, if being in the barn depresses you in any way, your horse will respond to that as well.



THE X FACTOR

Some barns seem to have it all -- caring people, good food, — spacious fields, fine training, yet something sets the horses on edge.

This is the X factor, an intangible something that's hard to put your finger on but you feel it in your gut. Everything looks great but there's something unsettling about the place.

When you find a barn like this, logic may tempt you to keep your horse there anyway hoping it will work out, and it might. As we all know, every horse is different and one horse may thrive where another would fade.

If you do go with that barn, keep a close watch on your horse. If his eye gets dull and he starts to give you crummy rides, your intuition was probably right; there's something off there.

FITTING YOUR NEEDS, TOO

Finally, in order to keep your horse happy, you must also be at ease. Find a balance between your horse's needs and your own. If you find the perfect arrangement except that it's too far to drive, it will break your budget, or you don't work well with the trainer, it won't be right for either of you.

You want to arrive at the barn and get on your horse without resentment. That honesty between you and your horse is essential and will give you better rides.

Take all these ideas into consideration when you're looking and you'll probably find a place the two of you will be happy in for a long time.

There is a barn that's right for you. It's well worth the time and energy to find it so you both thrive.

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Joseph developed The Equine Structural Integration Series© in 1995. He does individual sessions with horses, teaches two-day clinics for horse owners, and teaches a year long career mentorship program on his farm, Friendly Haven Rise.

