**Finding a Trainer for Your Gaited Horse**

*First educate yourself and do your research. Your prior preparation will be well worth your reassurance that your horse is not only being cared for, but is learning from someone who wants to help him/her become a better horse for you.*

* Define your goals: it is your job to know what you want for your horse. Don’t be sold on what a trainer is producing. Do you want show training, or trail seasoning? Do you want someone to start your horse under saddle or help with gait correction? Consider that you may not even need a “gaited” trainer, just a good, reputable, natural horsemanship trainer.
* Any gaited trainer should understand the fundamentals of gait correction through carriage modification. A horse must be *trained, not fixed*. Mechanical aids (weighted shoes, hoof angle modification, long curb bits) do not train the horse, and will not give you what you’re paying for, they are simply short cuts and Band Aids.
* Know exactly how much mechanical influence is acceptable for you*, if any*. For instance: is anything heavier than a keg shoe acceptable to you? Are you comfortable with the use of curb bits? If so, how long of shanks? These are standards you yourself must know and adhere to before you even begin talking with trainers. Note: Do not try to convince a trainer of what you don’t want. Trainers are notorious for doing things their own way. *Instead, find a trainer that already agrees with your standards right off.*
* A trainer should ask you about your riding habits, and what issues you feel you’re having with your horse, what your riding experience level is, about your horse’s history (does he have any “issues” to work through?), in order for him to have a good feel for “your” needs and those of your horse.
* Consider booking a lesson or two with a trainer to watch him/her work … with other horses as well if possible. Do you agree with this trainer’s philosophies? Does he/she answer your questions readily? Do they seem eager to share?
* Do the horses there appear healthy and in good flesh? Do they seem to feel comfortable with their environment, their work routine and this trainer? Do any of them appear to be in any distress for any reason? The horses can tell you a lot if you watch them closely.
* Observe how much of the hands-on work and daily handling is done by the trainer and how much by support staff. *Are you comfortable with this?* (Remember that your horse will be interacting with all of these people so you’ll want them all to be competent. Any one of them can mishandle a horse and create a serious problem.)
* Are the facilities clean and *safe*? (*Good fencing, lots of clean water, available shade or shelter, etc.*)
* Are there a reasonable number of horses in training? Do the math… can all the horses reasonably be worked regularly by the trainer at the promised schedule?
* Is management careful about boarding policies? (Health and vaccination records required, regular shoeing and worming schedules maintained?)
* Is the overall environment comfortable and congenial? Do *you* feel relaxed? Pay attention to your instincts here…they are telling you something!
* Are visitors welcome anytime? Are you invited to drop in and watch your horse being trained?
* There should be a contract spelling out how often your horse will be worked and all contingencies. Read it, know it and above all be comfortable with it. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Good trainers protect themselves as well as their customers with the contract.
* Don’t be afraid to ask for references. If they are any good at what they do, they will have plenty of people willing to say so. Many trainers fill their barns solely off of referrals.
* Set goals, discuss with the trainer about your horse reaching a certain point in 60 or 90 days…know that much of this depends on your horse and cannot be guaranteed…but this lets your trainer know that you expect results.
* Make sure the trainer plans to work with you as well. A trained horse is only part of the equation…your trainer must spend at least a few hours teaching you to work with your horse before sending him home with you.
* A good trainer should be willing to offer you even the opinions you really don’t want to hear. *Y*our horse’s abilities are first defined by his conformation and breeding; training can only enhance natural ability, not create something that isn’t there to begin with. A good trainer will honestly evaluate not only the horse’s talent but also his temperament. If a trainer tells you early on that your horse is a difficult fit for what you want, you must be prepared to make the decision to persist or rather try to help this horse be the best at what he/she *is* most suited for.
* It is the duty of a trainer to help an owner come into a higher level of partnership with their horse. They will do you no favors in not being honest with you. Unfortunately there are trainers out there that will simply take your money as long as you’re willing to pay them, without really helping you or your horse toward this goal. It is, as always, your job to constantly assess if progress is being made.