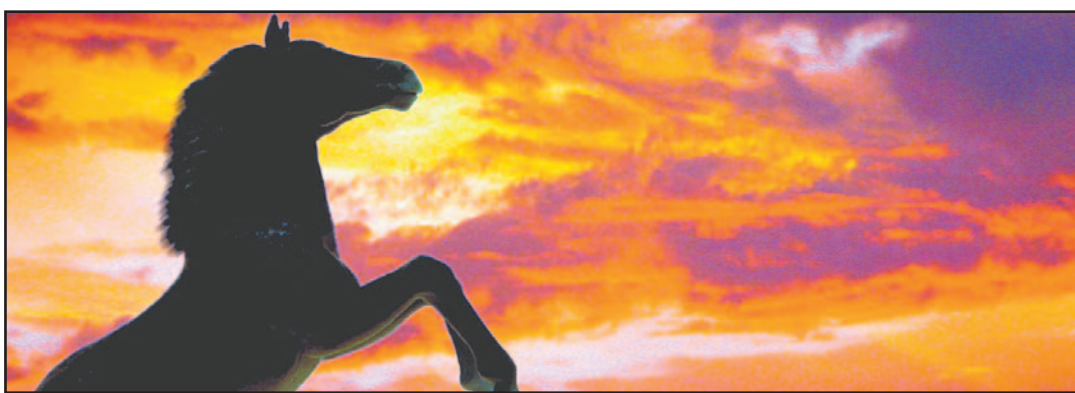


Ask the Alpha Mare



Email your questions and/or comments for Alpha Mare to alphamare@telus.net. Your feedback is welcome, and could be featured in an upcoming Alpha Mare column in *Horses All!*



You childhood dreams may have had you galloping bareback on a wild (insert favourite breed name) but, as The Alpha Mare says, "Know yourself and your limits."

by Kathryn Kincannon

Dear Alpha Mare,

I have a gorgeous black Sport Horse (Percheron/Thoroughbred) mare that I raised from a foal and is now coming six. I love this mare – she is family to me – and yet I find myself having thoughts now about whether or not she and I are a good "fit."

She is a very big horse, tends to be both pushy and aggressive (alpha mare of the small herd she lives with) and, all in all, is quite a handful, both on the ground and under saddle. Everyone else at the barn is quite afraid of her (which I am not as I know how she ticks) yet I am realizing that my goals (keen on dressage) may not be the best for her.

I can't afford to have a second horse and keep her too, yet I can't imagine parting with her. Any advice?

"On the fence" in Ontario
Dear OTF,

This is a soul-searching situation indeed. On the one hand, much as we might dream of doing so at times, we don't trade in our immediate family members – or our dogs and cats for that matter – for the latest, greatest models. Yet, we find it quite acceptable to do so with our horses. On the other, as divorce is a lawful way to bring human partnerships to a close in our culture, doesn't it open the door for a time-for-a-change mentality to carry over to

our equine partners as well?

Far be it from me to pass judgment. I've been divorced and I've bought and sold many horses in my adult life. I'm as guilty as the next horse-aholic in perpetuating the shuffling of "foster" horses from owner to owner, barn to barn.

I can't help, however, feeling the twinge of regret at the drama and hardship I co-created in order to resolve such changes of heart. Makes me wish I had been a little more wise and insightful before plunging into relationships (two and four-legged) that were destined for a short shelf life.

So, while I am astute enough to steer very clear of human-to-human waters, taking a moment instead to consider some stability factors in the human-horse arena may prove helpful to those of you "in the market" for your next or a new horse:

Know Yourself and Your Limits

This may sound like a self-help cliché, but it's far from it. A horse will size you up in a heartbeat. They spar with each other to perfect and hone their defensive skills, and they will spar with you to determine where you stand in the herd hierarchy – i.e. lead, follow or get out of my way!

A confident, fit, experienced rider who excels at athletics and

every step of the way.

That same horse with an attention-deficit teenager or middle-aged woman whose kids just left the nest and is now ready to get in shape and live her passion could be a recipe for disaster.

Know Your Breed and Gender

While there are, of course, exceptions to every rule, in general I have found that:

- Draft horses will plow through anything – and everything.
- Thoroughbreds run away.
- Arabs love a good temper tantrum.
- Quarter Horses play with your head.
- Warmbloods call your bluff.
- Ponies are hell-bent on proving themselves.
- Mustangs know they're on menus in France.
- Stallions are kingpins who don't miss a beat.
- Geldings are Dennis-the-Menace, playing you tit-for-tat.
- And mares, well, ladies, they're just like us: "nice" to your face, but constantly testing and secretly holding out for "the one" who is devoted to their well-being.

Know what level of "game" you are willing to play with a horse (for me, I'll take a "gotta go!" Thoroughbred over a "make me!" draft any day!) and be prepared to go there.

Don't kid yourself into thinking you'll "love" them out of their need to challenge you. They have to. In their minds, their survival depends upon it. So care enough about them to learn their language and play their games – then revel in the game rather than resent it (everyone hates a sore loser!)

Pretty Is as Pretty Does

We can't help it, we're all suckers for a pretty equine face. And we all have our "swoon" factors. But, especially for parents with daughters who "fall in love" with a certain pony or horse because it is just so gorgeous, I have to say it again: "Pretty is as pretty does."

Once you find a type of horse you are really drawn to for whatever reason, take the time to look at a variety of horses of that breed or type, study them to find out what they are really like, rather than what you imagine them to be, and then find one with an incredible temperament.

Look for a kind eye, a curled tail and a curious, willing mind. Look for a horse that has confidence and sensibility, whose body is willing to yield when asked correctly. Look for a polite horse that respects boundaries. Look for soundness and good conformation. Look for a horse that soothes your soul when you are in its company. Then, when it is pretty to boot, consider it icing on the cake!

All this being said, there is no need to feel guilty, OTF, about realizing your needs, goals, and wants with horses are changing. Everything happens for a reason, and chances are your mare may need a change too!

She may be better suited to pull a big, heavy cart rather than waltz around a dressage ring, and you may find your fantasy-come-true on a narrower, lighter horse who was born to float through transitions rather than lean on the bit.

Just know that many changes occur in our lives that will affect the quality of life for our horses. Know as well that horses – like people – love a good routine and come to appreciate "user-friendly" patterns they can predict and rely upon.

Also – like people – they tend to detest change. If you don't have the space or finances to keep your mare in your family, the best advice I can give is to be as responsible as you can in finding your horse a new home, and one well suited to her temperament and needs.

Finding her a new life where she will be happy and content will allow you a clear conscience and the "go-ahead" to be open to receiving the next horse and expand your equine horizons.

Kathryn

Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and "Train the Trainer" sessions throughout North America. They are currently developing Riversong Ranch Equestrian Retreat on the shores of the McLeod River just west of Edmonton.

If you have a question that you'd like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please email her at alphamare@telus.net

Horses All

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