

UNWANTED: OPTIONS FOR RESPONSIBLE HORSE OWNERS

Jane Duckworth November 2010

It would be ideal for every horse to retire to rolling green paddocks with horsey companions and an attentive owner, but regrettably this is often not possible. Responsible owners wish to provide a rosy future for their charges, but sometimes may be unable to do so. Others simply want to offload an animal seen as a liability that they no longer want to take responsibility for.

Horses may be unwanted or unusable because over time they have become sick, injured or old. Many unwanted horses have behavioural problems that have made them seemingly unmanageable for inexperienced owners.

Sometimes people problems lead to horse problems. In some cases, an owner's financial situation might change and they can no longer afford to properly care for the horse. The owner maybe cannot deal with their own life situation - such as a marriage breakdown, a death in the family, mental health problems – let alone the welfare of their horse. There may simply be no need to own a horse any more. Healthy horses also become unwanted.

Whatever the reasons, many people face the problematic decision of dealing with a horse that is excess to requirements. There are options to explore to resolve this dilemma, that any horse owner could face. Above all, you should ensure that the horse's health and welfare are at all times paramount to every other consideration.

Private sale

The best approach is to look for a new owner yourself – it's the only way to control your horse's fate. Advertisements can be placed on websites, in horse magazines, in newspapers, at feed and saddlery stores, at horse events or by directly contacting other horse owners and letting them know your horse is for sale. Of course some of these methods cost quite a bit of money and take time. If the horse is aged, infirm or has behavioural issues he will be hard to place, as others will be reluctant to take on a companion only, or light riding horse that will still cost the same to maintain as a healthy, useable horse.

'Free to a good home'

Owners that have been unable to sell their horse or who need to move them on quickly may decide to give them away. Unwanted horses can be successfully placed in responsible homes without any money changing hands, but owners need to be very wary of dealers, and people who fancy a free horse but lack the finances and knowledge to adequately care for one. Dealers and cunning private people can scan advertisements to grab these 'freebies', offering a supposed good home, then on-sell to knackeries. Be extremely careful about giving your horse away. Match him up with someone who appears genuine and able to provide appropriate care. An adoption with strings – a long term lease – could be a better choice. This way you maintain control of his future.

Leasing

Even a difficult or elderly horse could be successfully leased. You must remember to disclose any health problems, limitations or vices that your horse might have. Honesty is the best policy. This will assist in matching him up with a new owner who will know what issues to expect, and therefore is more likely to be able to cope, enjoy their new companion and keep him long term.

The concept of leasing can allow the potential owner to see if the horse could be the right one for them in the long term. Usually the owner loans the horse with the expectation of the lessee providing agistment, feed and general care.

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Horse retirement homes and sanctuaries

Australian horse rescue organisations are run by unpaid volunteers and generally do not take unwanted horses that owners would like to foist onto them. Most are only in the business of rescuing and rehabilitating horses that have been reported as neglect or abuse cases, then surrendered by the owners or passed on by the RSPCA.

Unlike the UK and the US, as far as I know, Australia does not have retirement facilities or unwanted horse sanctuaries for regular horses. There is Living Legends: International Home of Rest for Champion Horses near Melbourne Airport, set up as a tourist attraction, that currently houses 15 winners. There are at least two brumby sanctuaries in Australia, which are, in effect homes for wild horses that otherwise would have been classed as vermin and destroyed.

Some horse rescue groups have re-homing registers, or may provide advice or networking to help place horses that need to be moved on but may have little economic value.

What options do owners have when they face the difficult decision of dealing with an unwanted or unusable horse?

Abandoned, neglected or abused

Many unwanted horses are simply forgotten in the back paddock or left behind when owners leave a property. They could be left in the 'care' of someone else who neglects their new charges, due to disinterest or ignorance. Horses that fail to be sold on, or are considered 'worthless' due to age, injury or behavioural issues may be left to gradually fade away, eventually dying abandoned. No decision is ever made about their futures; the owners do not behave in a responsible way, so nature takes its course.

Saleyards and Slaughterhouses

Don't send your horse to the saleyards if you can't keep him. It's the easy, no-hassle way to get rid of a horse, but auctions are a pipeline to the slaughterhouses. Horses tend to sell for very low prices at saleyards, making them easy pickings for anyone with a few dollars in their pocket. You won't know who's buying your horse or where he's going.

Sending your horse to the sales is never a responsible way to treat your horse. (Slaughterhouses and the horsemeat industry will be discussed in a future article.)

Euthanasia: The last responsibility

If a horse cannot be successfully re-homed, responsible owners who can no longer keep their horse nor offer a sufficient standard of care, may ethically decide to euthanase. Others who want to squeeze the last few dollars of value out of the horse, without consideration for his welfare, will choose to send him to the saleyards.

Naive owners may fool themselves into thinking that at an auction, their unwanted horse - who may even be young and healthy - will find a pleasant new home, or they simply refuse to face the hard decision of arranging to have the horse humanely destroyed if they can't give them a secure and safe future.

If all else fails, ask your vet or local licensed knackery worker to humanely destroy your horse on home ground. This is always the hardest decision to make, but it's a far better alternative than dying in a slaughterhouse or living a life of neglect after falling into the wrong hands at auction.

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"They Shoot Horses Don't They?"

"Not every Dog has his Day"

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Administered by an expert, euthanasia can be humane, safe and gentle. You can control what happens to your horse, and you'll know he died peacefully. (End-of-life decisions will be discussed in more detail in a coming article.)

Become an advocate who believes that we should treat horses differently – that they are not a commodity with only an economic value, that they do have intrinsic worth as an animal - then spread the word. You can speak to other people who care about horses; be involved in horse welfare groups; write letters to the editor (especially in horse magazines); educate pony club and adult horse riding club members and support legislation that is horse-friendly.