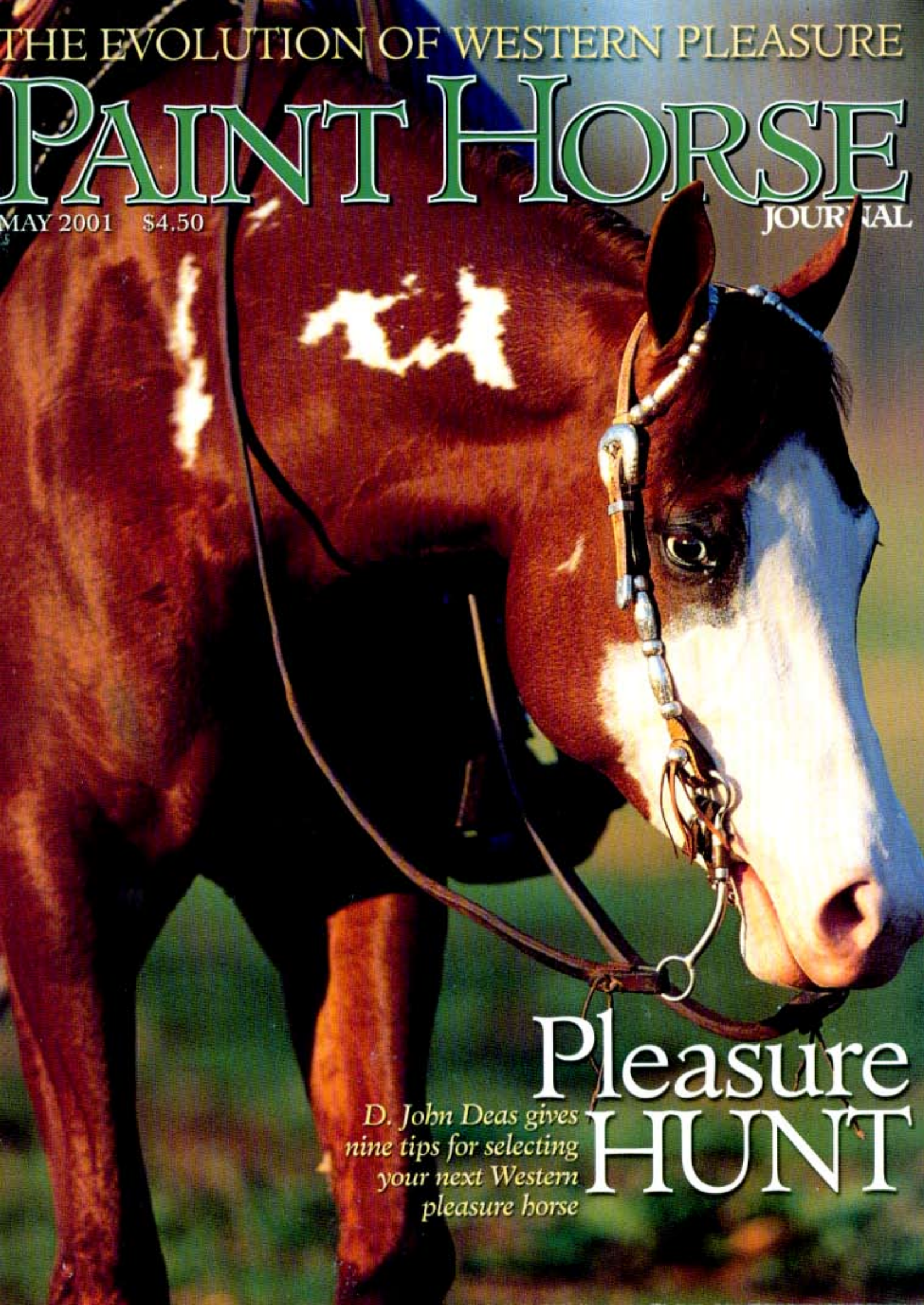


THE EVOLUTION OF WESTERN PLEASURE

PAINT HORSE

MAY 2001 \$4.50

JOURNAL



Pleasure HUNT

*D. John Deas gives
nine tips for selecting
your next Western
pleasure horse*



Educating Your Guess

Article and photography by ROSS HECOX

Although buying a show horse always involves some risk, D. John Deas offers advice on how to find a reliable Western pleasure mount

Buying a horse is an educated guess, at best," said D. John Deas. "There's a certain gamble in it."

Horses are not typically sold with a money-back guarantee or any kind of warranty. If they break down, lag in their performance, or seemingly become a different animal than what was originally purchased, sorry. All sales are final.

For this reason, buying a show horse should involve thorough research and comparison shopping.

Deas, who trains Western pleasure horses in Gastonia, North Carolina, helps many clients buy show prospects every year. He said that finding a well-broke and proven winner is difficult—not because only a few good mounts exist, but because there are so many other enticing buys that don't fit the bill.

For those seeking a Western pleasure horse, Deas said specialization and stiff competition in this event make the selection process even more crucial.

"It's not the same sport if you don't have a true Western pleasure horse between your legs," he said.

Impressive show records and high price tags don't always indicate quality. Traits such as movement, conformation, soundness

and disposition are better gauges of a horse's ability.

Deas said utilizing the expertise of a professional is a good idea when purchasing a horse. With or without help, however, a thorough understanding of all the components of a good pleasure horse will lead you to a sound, enjoyable ride.

Whether you are buying a young prospect or a seasoned campaigner, Deas lists nine of what he feels are the most important characteristics to look for in a Western pleasure horse.

1. Movement

Because Western pleasure is an event in which horses are judged on how well they walk, trot and lope, Deas regards quality movement as the most important trait for a pleasure horse to have.

"I prefer a horse that does not drag its toes at the trot," he said. "That kind of horse doesn't swing his hock freely and easily. He stubs his toe, and it's going to be tougher to keep him trotting up underneath himself at a slow trot.

"Some of those toe-draggers do okay, but they are seldom the kind of slow, cadenced, pitty-pat joggers that we want to put on the wall at the World Show.

Before buying a horse for Western pleasure, D. John Deas inspects it for the traits he considers necessary, such as conformation, soundness, quality of movement and disposition. Here, he looks over Mistee Jack Bar.

"I want a horse to pick his back foot off the ground and set it underneath himself."

At the same time, Deas looks for horses that are flat-kneed, referring to ones that exhibit a pendulum-like swing with their legs and show little bend in the knees or hocks at the trot and lope.

Good shoulder action also enhances movement.

"The horse needs to be able to lift the shoulder in order to swing his legs," Deas said. "At the lope, a horse has to have enough strength to come off the ground from behind and lift his shoulder. And to come off the ground at the lope, it's important for the horse to be collected."

A clean, straight two-beat trot and three-beat lope also must be accompanied by a quiet, relaxed head and neck carried level with the withers.

"The horse needs to be steady with his neck," Deas said. "You

don't want a horse that uses his head and neck up and down while cantering."

Deas also makes sure that a horse's quality movement is natural and not man-made.

"Good ones go around with a nice, flat neck and their hock underneath them because they want to," he said. "You can make the horse travel in the frame you like, but then it's going to be at the expense of movement."

"I don't want a horse to look like he is forced into that frame. It's making him do something that he really doesn't want to, and it takes a whole lot of mashing, aggravation and coercion to get him to move like we want."

"That horse is obviously going to get sick of it fast. So the ones that aren't natural at it are the ones that get to hate it."

"I think horses can be pleasure horses for a long, long time if they are good at it and it's an easy job for them."

2. Conformation

The way a horse is built usually determines how well it moves.

"I think Western pleasure is the most natural thing in the world for a horse if it is built to do it and mentally adept at doing it," Deas said. "There is a look that the performance horse has. You can tell by its body build that it is more suitable to do certain jobs."

"The bulldoggy-looking horses might be great at steer stopping. But they're going to be bulkier and harder hitting on the ground than the ideal pleasure horse."

"In general, the pleasure horse is not a 1,400-pound horse. I want to see enough muscle so that it's strong enough to push off of its hocks."

As Deas views a horse's topline, he looks for a short, strong back and a level or uphill slope from the hips to the withers.

"The horse needs to have withers," Deas said. "I think the withers have a lot to do with the horse's balance as he travels across the ground. We find some exceptions, but in my experience horses that have withers that sit at least level with the hip, or a little higher, do their job more easily."

To make sure the horse is able to perform in Western pleasure in a natural, comfortable way, Deas looks for animals that are built to carry their head and neck level with the withers.

"I want the neck to come out of the shoulder level," he said. "If it comes up out of the shoulders, then you have to push the neck down, and you change the whole balance of the horse."

"The length of neck is also important for balance. The horse is not going to be able to hang that neck in a steady way if its neck isn't at least as long as its back."

"Generally, a horse with a thin throatlatch and a long neck that ties into the shoulder tightly—by that I mean it doesn't have too much bulk there—will be more flexible through his head and neck."

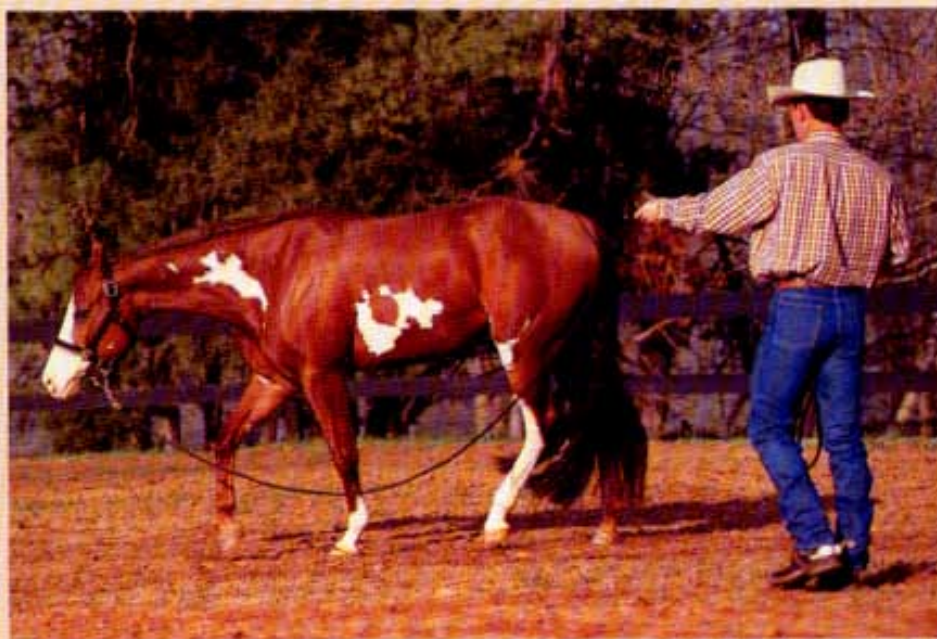


Left: Deas looks for horses that have eye appeal, a trainable disposition and an expression that shows that the horse enjoys its job.

Below: This mare's conformation illustrates several desirable qualities of a pleasure horse. She has a strong, short back; long, well-muscled hindquarters; low knees and hocks; and a long, clean neck that ties in low at the shoulder.



Natural-Born Movers



Deas looks for horses that naturally carry their head level and move in the ideal Western pleasure frame.

D. John Deas believes that the best Western pleasure horses naturally lope slow and collected, with a level headset. He avoids buying horses that have to be forced into

moving in the ideal Western pleasure frame.

"It doesn't seem that things really change," Deas said. "If a horse is a bad looper when it's 24 months

old—loping around with its neck up and not wanting to swing its hock—it's probably not going to quit doing that later."

Before buying any pleasure horse—whether it is a young prospect or an experienced show veteran—Deas finds out how the animal walks, trots and lopes naturally. Without a rider, saddle and bridle, horses tend to move in a way that is comfortable to them, whether it looks pretty or not.

Deas trots and lopes the horse on a longe line or in a round pen. Once the horse settles into a steady pace, he begins assessing the quality of its gaits.

"Take all the clothes off of him and chase him off," Deas said. "If the horse runs around with his neck jacked up, then that's the way he really lopes, and it's going to be much tougher for him to do what we want him to do."

A long, sloping shoulder is preferable to a steep one because it acts as a better shock absorber and can extend more easily. Deas also appreciates long, well-muscled hindquarters.

"The horses that are built better over their croup, loin and hip have definitely been better horses for me," he said. "The motor of the horse is very important."

Horses whose knees and hocks are low to the ground—meaning they have short cannon bones—tend to be more athletic and swing their legs cleanly underneath, displaying minimal knee action.

Straight legs, viewed both from the front and the side, enhance movement and are the key to durability.

"They all deviate from perfection a little bit," Deas said. "I forgive that. But a horse has got to look as if it's going to stay serviceably sound.

"As the horse tracks, the more deviation from straight forward his legs move, the more likely you are to have joint trouble.

"And he also won't move as pretty and freely. For example, pigeon-toed horses swing their front legs in and interfere with themselves. It complicates things and makes the horse more likely to be a problem."

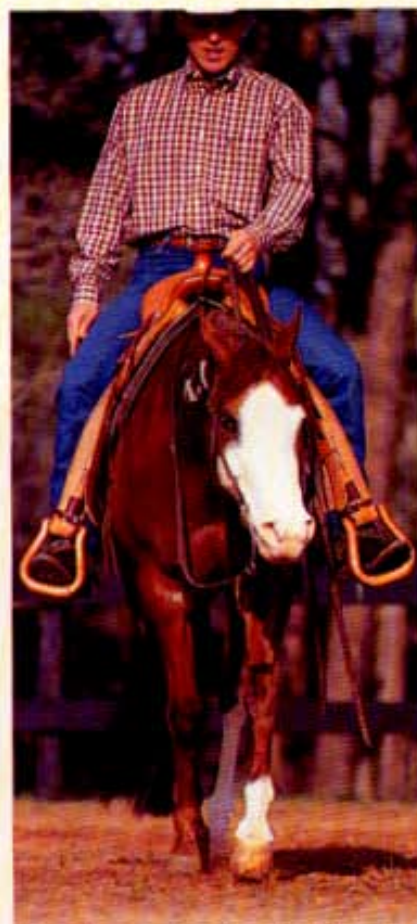
3. Eye Appeal

"You've got to have a horse that has a certain amount of eye appeal," Deas said. "If it doesn't make you think that it's pretty when you first look at it, then it's not ever going to."

It's easy to understand the importance of first impressions when considering the judge's point of view. A good pleasure horse should stand out in a crowd.

"I like to buy horses that are already in a horse show environment," Deas said. "You see a crowd of horses, and some of them catch your eye.

"The pretty ones have an eye appeal. They may not be perfect, but they have a charisma or spark that makes them more 'looky' than the rest. They look like winners."



Pay close attention to how the horse tracks toward and away from you. Straight movement improves the horse's performance on the rail and maintains soundness.

4. Soundness

A history of soundness problems is not always easy to detect. However, buyers need to make sure a horse is not hindered by past injuries or structural defects.

By simply watching a horse trot, it's easy to notice obvious lameness or current injuries. However, Deas recommends investigating further.

"I've learned that you need a competent vet that specializes in sport horse lameness to look at a horse, especially if it's an expensive horse," he said. "He should be experienced in that kind of pre-purchase exam.

"The most important part of a soundness exam, in my opinion, is the hands-on flexion test. It means more to me than the x-rays. In it, the vet squeezes the joint, putting it in abnormal strain, then lets it go and asks the horse to trot off."

Horses that are not completely sound show noticeable lameness at the trot after their ailing joint has been over-flexed.

5. Pedigree

"The family that a horse comes from can be a deciding factor," Deas said. "A daddy that had 300 pleasure points and a momma that had 300 plea-

sure points are more likely to have a foal that will earn 300 pleasure points.

"Now, if a horse looks good, moves good and acts good, I don't care where he came from. I'll ride him. But a pedigree helps, especially in resale value and marketability. I think everybody wants something that comes from a family of success."

6. Disposition

Traits such as pedigree, conformation, movement and eye appeal can be evaluated from a distance. But closer inspection is required for many other important factors, such as a horse's disposition.

"You want a horse that looks happy," Deas said. "One that is ill-natured all the time is going to be tough to change."

Deas tries to observe horses while they are in the show ring, the warmup pen, their stall and their home training stable. Different settings can reveal interesting aspects of a horse's personality or temperament, such as how it acts around other horses, responds to different handlers or deals with strange sights and sounds.

No horse is perfect, but a better feel for its disposition helps buyers make a more informed decision.

7. Training

No matter how well a horse performs on the rail, it's difficult to judge its level of training until you ride it yourself. Deas said buyers should make sure the horse is well-broke in performing all the necessary maneuvers.

If purchasing a young, greener horse, see that it shows signs of trainability.

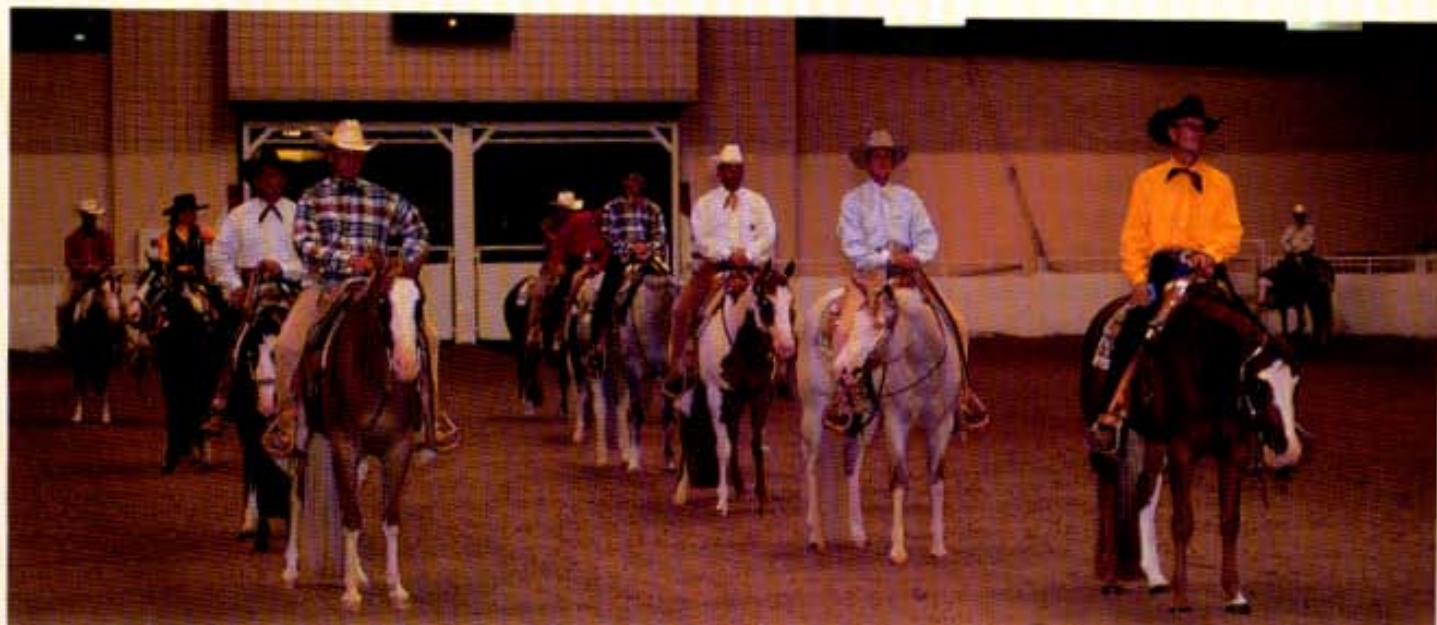
"How a horse responds to hands and legs is a thing that is not going to change readily," Deas said. "If it's a finished show horse, it shouldn't feel slab-sided and unresponsive.

"If the horse is young, and you lay your leg on it, if it starts wringing its tail, reaching back to bite your foot and carrying on like it hates it, that's not something that is easy to change."

Deas said that it is also beneficial to get to know a horse's trainers and the program they employ.

"It's much nicer to buy a horse when you know its history," he said. "There are people who do good in getting a horse shown, but then the horse is hard for others to ride. A lot of trainers say you have to be a rocket scientist to keep their horse going. Nobody wants that.

"I like getting horses from a program that I feel like I can maintain.



Deas looks for pleasure horses at various shows. There, he can watch the horse work in a show environment and see if the animal stands out in a crowd.



Riding a horse before buying it helps you determine its disposition, level of training and quality of movement. It's also good to note how the horse's personality and individual abilities match your own.

I don't want a horse that I have to starve, or its head is down because it has been whacked between the ears. I can't maintain that."

Deas said buyers can learn a lot about how a horse was trained by watching its trainer work.

"Does the guy snatch, spur and bang on the horse?" he asked. "Does the horse go without any force or trauma in his job?"

8. Maintenance

Deas added that buyers should weigh what steps or practices are necessary to keep an individual in show condition.

"What does it really take to prepare that particular horse to show?" he said. "And is that something that the individual buying the horse is willing to do or capable of doing?"

"So many people think you can ride a horse 15 minutes, then go show him. Very few horses are like that, and those that are are worth a fortune."

Just as warmup times vary, at-home preparation differs from horse to horse.

"Some take a certain amount of continuous socializing," Deas said. "I showed a stud that was the nicest horse I ever dealt with. But at home I had to ride him around other horses. If I didn't, he would

go to the horse show and wouldn't be happy around other horses."

Learning about a horse's individual quirks helps buyers determine if it matches their personal preferences.

"Clipping, shoeing, hauling and washing are things that have to be done to go to the show," Deas said. "If any of those things take more expertise than the owner has, it can be hard. If the horse is hard to live with, it's going to make the whole process much more complicated.

"If you're ready to drop \$40,000 on a horse, then get to know how he really is in the stall. Does he kick the wall at feeding time?"

Meet D. John Deas

D. John Deas still lives in his hometown of Gastonia, North Carolina, and trains horses on the farm his parents built when he was a child.

He grew up showing Quarter Horses in everything from barrel racing to working hunter, and began training horses for clients during high school.

"Being a horse trainer really wasn't something that I intended to keep doing," Deas said. "I knew a few people who said, 'Hey, will you ride my horses?'

"Some think, 'So what if he's hard to shoe, as long as he knocks it out at the lope going down the rail?' But for others, little things like that can be more of a determining factor."

9. Record

Finally, a horse's show record deserves consideration. Deas weighs its significance carefully.

"I think the record can help in making me feel confident about spending more money, but it's not everything," he said. "It makes me feel better if the horse has a lot of points with little showing. A whole lot of showing and a few points may mean that I'm not going to do much better.

"Somebody who wants a horse that will win at the World Show may want to get one that has been winning at that level of competition."

Buying a Western pleasure horse involves considering a vast array of characteristics. No horse is going to meet every expectation perfectly.

Before writing any checks, Deas recommends taking your time and knowing as much about a horse as possible. Then you can determine if its strengths and weaknesses will match well with you.

"You have to weigh everything out on each individual," Deas said. "It's your money. What do you want for your money?"

One year went into another year, and I'm still doing it."

Deas trained his first Paint Horse in 1993. Now Daisy D Farms is full of loud-colored overos and tobianos.

He rode White Stone to first place in Bridleless Western Pleasure at the 1997 World Show. Since then, Deas has consistently shown Western pleasure horses to Top 10 placings at the World Show, and he helps many Amateur and Youth competitors finish on the year-end Top 20 lists. ■