

# Solving the performance puzzle

*Buying a performance horse is a big investment, and not just in terms of money. **HORSE DEALS** looks at how going to a knowledgeable professional can be the answer, whether you're looking for a future dressage star, event prospect, show jumper or showing contender.*

When you're looking for a potential or proven performance horse, it's all too easy to pay big money and still make big mistakes. Even if you are looking for top Continental bloodlines, the safest way to buy - and often to save time and money as well - can be to go to a professional who has already done the hardest part.

Not only will they have selected horses with a knowledgeable eye, they will know how a horse behaves in most situations and what sort of regime it will benefit from. You

should also get an after sales service to help you build a partnership during those vital early days; temporary glitches are inevitable, but being able to ring up for advice or have lessons will prevent minor drawbacks turning into major problems.

It might be tempting to go abroad and look for your dream horse, but as a one-off exercise it can be risky. Ian Winfield, who runs Oldencraig Equestrian Centre in Surrey, has heard many horror stories. "The worst problem is when someone goes to try

a horse, buys it, and when it comes back they find the horse is too much for them," he says. "Someone may tell them on the phone that it's suitable for a relative novice, but it's very easy to make a horse tired!"

He and his fiancée, international dressage rider Vicky Thompson, buy many horses on the Continent which are produced and sold at Oldencraig at price ranges from £8,000 upwards. The difference is that they have a network of good contacts and assess horses thoroughly before matching them with suitable buyers. "We have certain people we always go to in Holland and Germany and know we can trust them. We prefer to buy horses from the older bloodlines and we'll look at ten to thirty horses at a time," he explains. "We might buy ten, or we might not buy any."

"Then we gradually assess them. For instance, we have horses at the moment that came over from Germany three weeks ago; we rest them, feed them, make sure there are no runny noses and so on. Then we ride them, then we hack them out and so on. We have a huge checklist of things they have to do before offering them for sale."

He wants people to be confident when trying a horse and won't sell if he doesn't think the pair will gel. "Sometimes people will say, 'I've got a hundred grand in my pocket, now bring out the top ones,'" he says. "But if I need to tell them in a nice way that at the moment, they couldn't ride them, I will."



Ian Winfield and Minnie at Oldencraig





*Antonia Brown competing on Florentina at Keysoe*

Oldencraig customers who opt to keep a horse there are immediately given a discount on the price and those that can't, or prefer to take them home, can have training before they go. And if you think top class dressage horses only go in arenas, think again. "We jump our dressage horses and we hack them out," says Ian. "Most people like the idea that they can do dressage, but can also go for a hack if they want to."

## Buying a dream

When you buy a horse, you buy a dream - but as eventing and show jumping specialists Tim and Antonia Brown's customers know, buying from the right person can give better odds of that dream coming true. Their experience of competing at top level, buying and selling horses and training senior and junior riders enables them to assess horses and riders quickly and accurately.

"When you jump a horse, it should only take two or three jumps to know whether it's going to do the job or not," believes Tim. "You don't need to build a fence that's high or wide - that's a mistake a lot of less experienced people make. It's all about style and technique. When you do performance testing of three-year-olds, inexperienced people will tell you their horse has jumped a big fence, but what really matters is the horse's style, confidence and athleticism."

The couple sells mostly four to six-year-olds; as Tim puts it, "We don't have the

ones people have gone wrong with." However, their experience also enables them to spot horses that might not make the absolute top in one discipline but can be stars in another, perhaps a dressage horse that won't go to Grand Prix but will be a fabulous show jumper or eventer with the right rider. They can also match riders with the horses they need - even if the riders don't know it - and Antonia also specialises in event ponies.

"Sometimes you have to get people here, have a chat and put them on a horse," says Tim. "Then you can see that they need a horse about 16hh that they can cope with in DIY livery, and so on. You need to ask questions, because there may be things they haven't thought of."

For many riders, an "after sales service" can be more valuable than they perhaps realise. Like Ian Winfield, Tim and Antonia can also arrange for a client to have a few lessons on a new purchase. When this isn't possible, they will try and make sure things go well in the early days. "If I don't hear



*Geoff Luckett on Milton*





Show producers Tim and Christie Fairburn

from someone, I'll make a call to see how they're getting on with a horse," says Tim.

Some people may consider that buying from a professional who produces horses for sale is more expensive. But in the long run, it can work out cheaper, as Tim points out. "I can understand how they feel, because perhaps I'd think that if I bought a car from a main dealer it would be more expensive than buying privately," he gives as an example.

"The difference is that if you get a problem, you can go back to them. Horses aren't machines, but if someone buys what should be the right horse and has a little problem to start with, we can sort it out."

## Experience counts

It can be well worth investing in someone else's experience. In the case of Geoff Luckett, that includes competing on ten British Nations Cup teams and 30 years competing at top level - he first rode at the Horse of the Year Show at the age of 17, in the Foxhunter championship. Now, as well as staying at the top of his game, he produces and sells show jumpers ranging from absolute novices to Grade As and his customers range from amateur riders to fellow professionals.

Geoff buys good horses wherever he can find them, though if he buys from abroad he only deals with people he knows, as even people with his experience can be

caught out. He once bought a horse from an unfamiliar source only to find that it had two microchips, so had two "identities." He also tries to match horses and riders and as a BSJA accredited coach is in demand as a teacher.

"I always try and steer someone away from a horse they won't get on with," he says. "It's a problem when people don't want the type of horse that would suit them."

Geoff knows how to assess horses as

*"I always try and steer someone away from a horse they won't get on with."*

individuals rather than being fixated on a particular stamp. For instance, whilst some riders would turn down anything under 16.2hh, he is just as happy to look at a smaller horse, provided it shows the right jump and attitude. Vantage, one of his great partners - still happy in retirement at the age of 32 after winning £250,000 during his career - is barely 15.2hh, as is another of his finds, Marleen.

At the other end of the scale, he and his girlfriend, Claire Beecroft, were happy to buy the 18hh stallion Compliment for Claire to ride, despite the fact that she is only 5ft 3ins. The couple met when Claire bought what Geoff counts as one of his best horses, the Grade A Melton, who helped give her the confidence to jump at that level. Claire agrees that buying a good horse isn't always enough: you need the right back-up.

"When you follow a professional - as long as it's the right professional - the horses are full of confidence," she says. "If there is a fence in front of them, they'll jump it. Geoff is great at riding with total belief and he's also a great teacher."

Finding horses is demanding and time consuming. When show producers Tim and Christie Fairburn go on a shopping expedition to Ireland, France or Holland they will see 200 horses and cover 1000km in a day. Over the years, they have found countless champions, from Tim's legendary working hunter Scotch the Rumours to last year's novice sensation Keep Talking, who has gone to a new home this year.

"We have to really like everything we buy," says Christie. "We can tell pretty quickly if something is a possible or not: a horse can be walked out of its stable and I can say no thanks, it's not for me more or less straight away. But sometimes one walks towards you and you can just see a sash on it, it looks like a show champion."

"Even then, everything has to follow on. You have to inspect the legs, the movement, ask yourself if it's got the potential to be wonderful to ride. But whilst more or less

everything we have is for sale, we won't sell a horse to the wrong rider, because it's our reputation and also not fair on the horse. That's why we're happy for people to bring professionals with them, especially if they teach them - and if necessary, we can point them to someone in their part of the world who could help them if they need lessons."

One thing they will never do is try a hard sell. "I always say to people that if they see a horse and know it's the one for them, and are so excited at the thought of buying it that they can't wait to get it home, they shouldn't hesitate," says Christie. "But

if they have any hesitation, however small, they should walk away."

Whilst professional sellers won't automatically put the biggest price tags on their horses, you can't expect to pick up a bargain. Having said that, by helping you avoid problems they can also help you make the greatest savings. Being a stay at home buyer could, in the long run, give you the best value in the world.