

## Sending Your Horse For Training - What To Expect?

By Tracy Dopko

It's nearly every horse owner's dilemma. A horse in need of training, but where to send it? How do you get started and find the right trainer and facility to suit your needs? Before sending your horse out for training, it's important to do your research, determine your long term goals with your horse and decide what will work best for both you and your horse.

The best place to start is to ask yourself some key questions. Is your horse in need of getting started under saddle or an older horse in need of finishing or a tune-up? Starting a horse under saddle is very different than doing finishing work on an older horse and may require a different type of trainer. If you're looking to get your horse started under saddle, is the trainer experienced with starting colts?

Make sure you are familiar with the training methods being used. How is your horse going to be started? Does the trainer use round penning, do they sack out their horses, ground drive and so on? And, are you in agreement with the methods being used? Not everyone believes in every method out there so, it's important to find a trainer with common philosophies and goals. Is every horse started the same way or is an individual program created for each horse? Not all horses are the same, can be started using the same methods and in the same amount of time. Some horses seem to be "born broke", while others need further time, care and patience before their training can progress to an acceptable level. It's also important to communicate with your trainer and make sure they understand the long term goals you have for your horse. If you're planning on marketing your horse as a Hunter/Jumper once training has been completed, then you don't want your horse stuck at a training barn and being asked to work on Western Pleasure the entire time they are there. It's important to make sure that you and your trainer are on the same page, as far as common goals go.

If you are looking for a trainer to do the finishing work or tune-up on your horse, find a trainer who specializes in the discipline your horse is trained in. If you are gearing your horse for the show ring, make sure you find a trainer who exudes professionalism and pays attention to detail. Finding a trainer who has a good reputation and respect in the discipline you've chosen is important. Sending your dressage horse for a tune-up, in hopes of attending your first show will likely not result in success if the trainer you choose has limited knowledge and success in dressage. They will likely spend more time worrying about your horse staying on the bit and being obedient, rather than concentrating on teaching your horse impulsion, pace, balance and suppleness.



Make sure you are honest and up front. If your horse has a bucking problem when being asked to pick up the canter, make sure you let the trainer know ahead of time. Hiding behavior problems will only hinder a horse's training progress. A well respected and knowledgeable trainer will analyze a problem, such as bucking into the canter transition, and often look elsewhere for the underlying trouble. It may be as simple as the saddle pinching the horse in one area and causing pain. Maybe a physical hindrance or lameness issue is preventing the horse from cantering properly? A well educated trainer will look at a training problem from all angles to determine what is happening with the horse. A trainer who's method is to physically "cowboy" a problem horse during training sessions, before first assessing the past history of the horse, is probably not the best trainer to use and could be detrimental to the horse's future!



Training fees and location are key topics to discuss. The distance your horse will be from home will be an important factor for many people. How often will you want to check on your horse? Many trainers prefer that the owner not come out for the first few weeks or so. If that is the case, and you are not concerned with being there during the initial stages of training, being a long distance from your horse may not be of great concern. However, if you are planning on taking regular training sessions with your horse or lessons, finding a trainer close to home may be more beneficial.

Communicate with the trainer. What does it cost to train your horse and how long will it take? You will get a thousand different answers from a thousand different trainers. Making a decision based on price alone can be difficult. A trainer with a fancy facility and a brand new truck and trailer, who charges top dollar for training, doesn't necessarily mean you're going to get your money's worth! Likewise, the "cheap deal" and the guarantee "broke in thirty days" should always be a buyer beware in many instances.

Ask questions! It can't be stressed enough. Who is going to be riding your horse? It's a question many owners don't even think to ask. Sending your horse to a trainer who is charging full price for their working student to do all of the

riding on your horse is unethical and often opens up a can of worms regarding liability, if the horse or student should become injured. Many trainers offer the option of a horse to be trained with a working student, while still under the tutelage of the head trainer. It may be an option to consider, as the training fees should be greatly reduced, but should only be done if the working student, or second trainer, is extremely knowledgeable and experienced. Trainers who take your money for full training and neglect to inform you that they won't always be the one on your horse constitutes fraud and extremely unethical business practices. So, make sure you ask questions and make sure you communicate what you want done with your horse. If you don't wish anyone other than the trainer to sit on your horse, make sure you are up front with your horses requirements while in training.

What constitutes a training session and how long are training sessions? Sometimes, all that is needed is thirty minutes worth of work. Depending on the difficulty of the task and whether the horse is grasping the training session, more time may be needed. There is no rule that a training session has to last an hour or more. In all likelihood, it is best if the training sessions are kept short and productive, so not to sour the horse and keep them keen on the next training session. If being taken to a show, how many classes will they be in? A horse should never be asked to compete in more than five to six classes a day maximum, depending on the discipline, fitness level and weather conditions. Example, the majority of lower level dressage horses are capable of competing in two to four classes in one day, while most hunter and western pleasure horses are comfortable competing in five to six class a day. Fatigue due to extreme heat or lack of fitness level will decrease the number of classes that a horse will be comfortable with and, pushing past that comfort zone can potentially cause long term permanent physical damage to the horse. Horses are an investment and ill regard to their well-being can cause irreparable wear and tear on their joints, tendons and ligaments which can shorten a horses riding career. Trainers seen entering a horse in ten or more rigorous classes a day show no respect and concern towards their horses and are definitely not thinking about preserving the longevity of a horses riding career, whether for pleasure or show.

Make sure the communication goes both ways and you are approachable and easy to get a hold of. If you've sent your A Circuit Jumper Prospect out for finishing training, and to prepare him for his first horse show, your trainer should be professional enough to speak up immediately if your horse seems incapable of achieving your goals. An unethical trainer will be more likely to keep their mouths shut and taking your money month after month. If your expectations for the horse are unreasonable, or you're hoping to get the training done in an unrealistic amount of time, have respect for a trainer who explains that your goals may be slightly unreasonable or unattainable for that particular horse. Please remember that a thirty day miracle is rarely seen and a sixty to ninety day tune-up or finishing program is often more realistic, depending on the initial training of your horse.

Is your horse being properly looked after while away for training? Find out where your horse will be stabled – inside or outside. Check into what turn-out options are available and how many horses will be sharing their turn-out. What is their feeding program like and the choices and quality of feed being offered? Does each horse receive their own custom feeding program to coincide with their training program? Generally speaking, the law expects trainers to give “reasonable care” to horses kept in their care, custody and control. If it turns out that the trainer has exercised poor judgment and jeopardized the health and well-being of a horse in training, the owner may have the right to seek legal action against the trainer for the loss or devaluation of the trained horse due to the horse being denied reasonable care.



What happens if the horse becomes injured or ill while in the trainer's care? It's important to determine when and how you will be notified and if the trainer has been given permission to seek veterinary attention if they are unable to contact you first. Are important steps being taken at the training facility to ensure the safety and well-being of your horse? Is the trainer insuring that training boots, polo wraps or other methods of leg protection are being used during training sessions? Is the turn-out area for your horse constructed of safe fencing and footing? What is the footing in the arena or training areas like? Are saddles being checked to ensure a proper fit or does every single horse get ridden in the same tack? Not all horses are built the same or require the same training tools and equipment. Using the correct tack and properly fitting equipment is key to the progression of a horse in training!

Make sure your horse has met all of the training facility requirements before you show up on their doorstep. What vaccinations does the facility require before your horse can step on the property? Is a negative Coggins test required? Besides administering basic vaccinations and deworming, make sure their feet have been recently attended to before sending them out for training.

Before commencing any training, make sure your veterinarian has been out to float your horses teeth and pull out any wolf teeth present. Ideally, no horse should have a bit placed in their mouth until proper dental work has been done.

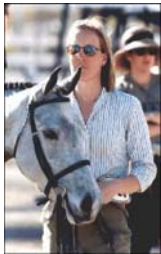
Mild to severe physical, mental and behavioral problems can result in a horse due to the bit coming in contact with sharp edges on teeth and/or wolf teeth that interfere with the bit. Most knowledgeable and professional trainers require a horse to have proper dental care before training can begin. Trainers who eagerly accept a horse in for training with no regard or concern to the current status of a horse's dental care should be avoided.

The proof is in the pudding. Ask around and get references. Travel to the training facility ahead of time, if this can be arranged, and watch the trainer in action before you decide on sending your horse there. Try and get in touch with past clients and find out if they were satisfied with the service they received. Were they happy with the results – was it everything they expected and were the goals and expectations properly communicated with the trainer, and achieved? Were they happy with the condition of the horse during training and after being sent home? The number one question: Would they use the same trainer again?

Beware of promises. Promises of future performance are likely to create unrealistic expectations. Are you able to visit the training facility and watch your horse in action? A horse owner, after visiting a training facility a few times but not seeing their horse actively involved in training should be a warning sign. One might assume then, that the trainer has done nothing to earn their money. Make sure you are able to watch your horse from start to finish during a training session - from tacking up to being cooled down. Having your horse presented to you for a training session, when it is clear they have already been worked or worn down, should also be a warning sign that things may not be going as well as what you have been told. Trainers can promise to make every effort to train a horse to your satisfaction but unrealistic promises should be avoided at all costs, at least until such time a horse can be properly assessed.

This is where a Training Contract can be an important element for both horse owner and trainer. A well drawn up contract should benefit all parties involved. At a minimum, a Training Contract should include; fees and other payment obligations, what to do in case of an emergency, a statement of purpose of the training, what constitutes reasonable care and what stabling and feeding requirements will be adhered to, and the Province or State whose laws apply. Other important issues that can be included are release of liability, insurance requirements and the location for legal disputes.

Communication is the key! You are the sole decision maker in regards to which trainer you choose. A decision based on long term goals, location, price, ideologies and your own experiences will help you find the trainer that will best suit you and your horse. Horse training is a serious business. The relationship works when both trainer and horse owner take their obligations seriously. For the trainer, this means training the horse in good faith and to the best of their abilities. For the customer, this means having realistic goals and expectations...and paying your bill on time!



Tracy Dopko has trained countless horses and ponies in Dressage, Hunter/Jumper, Driving, In Hand and Western and taken in horses for training and showing from all across Canada and the United States. She has won over \$45,000 in hunter earnings, produced countless Futurity and Hunter Classic winners, over 100 A Circuit Championships in both Hunter and Dressage, including several Canadian National and US National Hunter Champions. Now retired from professional training, Tracy focuses on training her own horses and ponies for competition and resale at her private training facility in Darwell, Alberta, Canada. Her philosophy is that proper conditioning and training, saddle fit, arena footing, turn-out, the understanding that each horse and pony is an individual and a close relationship with both farrier and veterinarian lead to superior results!