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Plan ahead for your horse's retirement

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Considering future options for your horse can help ensure he has a comfortable retirement or safely transitions into a different career.

PLANNING YOUR HORSE'S RETIREMENT

BY GLENYE CAIN OAKFORD

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Objectively assess your horse's physical status, skills, and temperament as you consider whether he needs full retirement or might be happy and useful in a new job.

The EQUUS Foundation suggests planning for two scenarios: one in which your horse is sound enough to move to a different job, and the other in which he needs complete retirement.

When horses are in their prime, earning ribbons and points at shows or serving as trusty trail companions, their future retirement needs can seem distant. But planning ahead for your horse's life after he leaves service with you will make the process easier, especially if your horse's retirement comes unexpectedly, such as through injury. And considering future options for your horse also can help ensure he has a safe and comfortable retirement or potentially transitions into a different career.

"Some horses will need to be literally retired, and with others, you'll be planning the transition to their next career, but either way, it's critical to plan," explained Lynn Coakley, President of the EQUUS Foundation, a 501(c)(3) public charity that is the only national animal welfare charity in the United States 100% dedicated to protecting America's horses and strengthening the bond between people and horses. "Unfortunately, there's no guarantee that a horse will live out a happy, humane life. There's a perception that horses are property like a car or a bicycle, but we're of the belief that they're very sentient, they bring joy, and even though they're large and often more expensive than a pet like a dog or cat, we owe them in respect of the fact that they give so much."

Coakley cautions horse owners not to simply take for granted that their horse will end up in a safe, happy retirement or second home when the time comes. The stakes for a horse who is retiring or moving into a new career can be higher than many people realize when they give away or sell horses that are aged or no longer useful to their programs, says Valerie Angeli, the EQUUS Foundation's Vice-President of Engagement and Special Projects.

"It's absolutely critical to start thinking about it as early as possible," Angeli said. "There are more options than you might know for horses that are transitioning or retiring, and you need to know what you can do for your horse. But every horse is different, every horse has a different personality, and every horse is just one bad decision or one non-decision away from abuse, neglect, or slaughter."

The EQUUS Foundation's vision is "that horses will naturally transition from one career to the next without risk of abuse, neglect, or the threat of slaughter, and, when the time comes, they will experience a peaceful and humane end of life." In service to that vision, the foundation offers a range of resources and information to bring horses and humans together—and to help horses to retire safely or begin second careers—say, in intercollegiate riding programs, therapy programs, or a new discipline.

Some horses need full retirement, but others can enjoy useful second careers with light exercise or in a different discipline.



PHOTO: SHELLEY PAULSON PHOTOGRAPHY

“When a horse’s final moments are inevitable, when he can’t enjoy his life anymore, we are in agreement that euthanasia is an option,” said Angeli. “And anywhere that horse goes, the humane euthanasia, by a veterinarian and with dignity, should be the final step—never slaughter, and never the complete unknown future, like sending the horse to a general livestock auction where the horse could end up in bad hands or shipped to slaughter. We are very much against that.”

So how to begin thinking about your horse’s future safe landing? Coakley and Angeli suggest making plans for two scenarios: one in which your horse is sound enough to move to a different job, and the other in which he needs complete retirement. They offer these six tips to get you started.

EXPLORE THE FULL RANGE OF MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL OPTIONS FOR YOUR HORSE.

There are a host of opportunities for horses: lesson mount, inter-collegiate equine program horse, mounted-police horse, trail-riding horse, and more.

One area that Coakley sees as having great potential for horses is equine-assisted therapeutic services. Some programs will have specific requirements for horses, and it’s important to know those to help determine whether your horse will be a good fit. But equine-assisted therapeutic services covers a wide range of program types, from riding for people with physical disabilities, to programs offering unmounted interactions with horses as part of emotional healing, and beyond.

“The therapeutic environment is demonstrating that the horse is a healer, and that increases the number of opportunities where people can engage with horses,” said Coakley. “In some cases, that can involve riding or even competing on them. But the premise of the relationship is that it’s a therapeutic activity. One of the things we look for is, is the horse a tool or is the horse a partner in the process?”

You might be surprised what options are out there, even for horses who can no longer be ridden. Angeli noted that the Long Island University’s School of Veterinary Medicine needed “good-natured, handle-able” horses who were ready for retirement and could help teach students about handling horses and non-invasive examinations.

OBJECTIVELY ASSESS YOUR HORSE’S PHYSICAL STATUS AND PERSONALITY.

To identify some potential roles for your horse, carefully consider his limitations as well as his skills. Some options for equine retirement, like being a pasture companion, require little physical exertion. Others, such as a lesson barn or intercollegiate program, require more.

“Knowing your horse’s temperament and talents and what career he could transition to that would be mutually beneficial will help you do what’s best for that horse,” Angeli explained. “Consider, too, what he likes to do. If he’s not loving jumping, he’s probably not going to be

Your veterinarian and your trainer can help you assess your horse's physical abilities and temperament, as well as any limitations, to determine his suitability for a second career.



happy at a hunt seat intercollegiate riding program, but maybe he'd be a great fit for a Western program where he can retrain and help inspire the next generation of riders. Consider getting your veterinarian and trainer's assessment of your horse's capabilities and limitations, too."

CHECK OUT EQUUS FOUNDATION'S GUARDIANS AND SAFE LANDINGS PROGRAMS.

The EQUUS Foundation's Guardians program at equusfoundation.org is a good place to start checking an organization's reputation. "It's a network of organizations who have our Guardian seal on their name," Angeli said. "That means that they're one of the equine organizations throughout the country that have passed a rigorous screening process of transparency. We want to know everything about their horse-care practices, including their veterinarian, the records their vet keeps, whether they send horses to slaughter, what they use a horse for before the horse is retired, where they retire horses. All of this information about the organization lives on our website, so you can look it up and see everything about them."

Another EQUUS Foundation program, Safe Landings (equusfoundation.org/safe), lists Guardian-seal and other vetted programs that are actively looking for horses for a variety of roles. The listings include the specific qualities they're looking for, details of the horse's role, the organization's re-homing and euthanasia policies, and more.

RIGOROUSLY CHECK OUT THE INDIVIDUAL, FARM, OR ORGANIZATION TO WHOM YOU ARE CONSIDERING SENDING YOUR HORSE.

"By law, horses are property and whoever owns the horse can do what they want. So it's important to check out the reputation of the individual or organization you place a horse with," said Angeli. "A place might have a splashy website and look fabulous, but we warn people, 'Don't fall for a website. Do your homework and find out what their reputation is.'"

Angeli also recommends consulting references as well as past and current clients and doing a site visit. "And call the local humane organization, animal control, Society for the Protection of Animals, or even the local police department that's nearest and see if there have ever been any issues or any neglect or abuse cases filed," she added.

GET A REHOMING CONTRACT WITH THE INDIVIDUAL OR ORGANIZATION WHERE YOU'RE PLACING A HORSE.

It can help protect your horse if you stipulate in writing that you'll be notified immediately (or given right of first refusal, if you wish) before he is moved, adopted, or sold, said Coakley. But, again, it's important to have done your homework about the organization or person you're dealing with, and following up regularly about your horse never hurts.

PHOTOS: SHELLEY PAULSON PHOTOGRAPHY

"One of the most important ways an owner can protect their horse: having a written agreement between the buyer and the seller," Coakley said. "We're seeing some rescues move more toward bills of sale to increase the numbers of adoptions they can do, but we're of the thinking that we'd like to see a bill of sale have as much protection as possible for the horse, and more awareness of where the horse is going, built in."

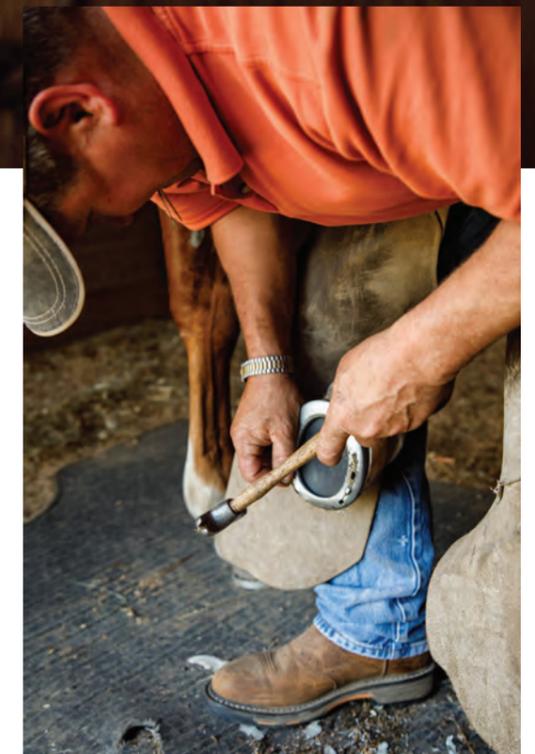
ONCE YOUR HORSE HAS MOVED IN, FOLLOW UP.

Keeping tabs on your horse or pony post-retirement is also key, Coakley and Angeli say. Schedule regular check-ins, but not just in the form of a quick phone call.

"Have them send you pictures, if the place isn't close by, and, if you can, visit, as well," said Coakley.

If your retired or rehired horse is with a nonprofit or charitable organization near you, you might also consider volunteering there, whether with hands-on horsemanship or office skills. In fact, that's a great opportunity for any horse lover, not just horse owners, says Angeli, and she encourages interested people to check out EQUUS Foundation's Champions equine service program, which is sponsored by Ariat, to find opportunities.

"Our website at equusfoundation.org is really a one-stop shop for people who love horses and want to get involved," she said. "Most of our Guardian charities rely on volunteers, and volunteers are desperately needed. These are places where you can learn about horses, get involved, get in shape, and also make good friends who also love horses."



EQUUS Foundation's Guardians program is a valuable source of information about potential places to retire your horse, including each organization's farrier and veterinarian, how they use the horses in their care, their retirement and euthanasia policies, and more.



RETIRING TOMASA: LESSONS, COMFORT, AND JOY

by Ashley Collins

When my mare Tomasa had to be retired due to an injury, I felt like I was losing a part of my family. It was difficult to accept that this 19-year-old horse, whom I had leaned on both physically and emotionally for the past decade, would no longer be central to my life.

We first met on a hot Sunday afternoon, the last day of a fall horse show at the L.A. Equestrian Center in California. Tomasa was clipped into crossties in the barn aisle where she was temporarily stabled, still breathing hard after being tried by my then 14-year-old daughter Wendy, who was lifting her saddle from Tomasa's sweaty back as I arrived. Tomasa watched me approach with beautiful sloe eyes, her ears pricked forward curiously despite the tiredness she exuded. I greeted her softly, holding out my hand, and she put her nose into my palm. There was something about her that I recognized, as if she had suffered but still hadn't lost her spirit, and I was instantly drawn to her.

Both of us were athletic, highly competitive, and had blood that turned hot whenever the jumps went up. After a few months of training at home, we began showing in the low amateur jumpers, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd had so much fun or felt so connected to myself, having Tomasa as a partner.

When I started to ride again in my 40s, it put my already strained marriage under more pressure. Paradoxically, it was

also the one thing that gave me the strength to handle a family that seemed to be breaking at the seams. I was raising three children and drowning in a sea of self-doubt about my marriage, my parenting strategies, and my own capacity for resilience. Although I turned to therapy for help, the one place I felt strong was at the barn, surrounded by the healing energy of horses and the sport of show jumping, which fed my body and soul like vital oxygen.

Tomasa was like life support during this period of my divorce being finalized, my father dying, and my kids lashing out at me in devastation and anger. I found comfort in Tomasa, in her warmth and solidity. Just the smell of her would slow my heart rate down, the feel of her soft coat under my hand lessening the ache of grief inside me. She didn't like big displays of affection, but on my worst days she would stand quietly in her stall and let me sob into her neck.

Riding and showing Tomasa kept me grounded, gave me structure and purpose when it felt like the rest of my life was blowing up. The discipline of daily training, the mental focus it required, and the responsibility I had to my horse gave me the confidence I desperately needed to face my challenges, both in and out of the ring. Jumping technical courses, communicating constantly with Tomasa in a physical as well as psychological sense, reminded me that I still had a good partnership, even if my marriage no longer was. I could still feel the joy in being part of a team, feel the hunger to win, and even how it felt to succeed.

The last time I showed Tomasa, we jumped clean and ended up third out of a field of about 90. It was a great result for us, and I knew then we couldn't beat it, not with her age at that height, built at a solid 1.25 meters. Not when she brought 150% to the ring every single time we showed. She had so much heart she would try until she broke, and I didn't want to break her.

One day when I went to visit her in the paddock, I was overcome with sadness for this great horse who had given me everything she had in her to give, who literally saved me when I thought I might not survive my grief. As I leaned over the gate, tears of shame and guilt began rolling down my cheeks, knowing that I would move on without her. And then Tomasa did something she has never done before. She touched her nose to my face and gently ran her muzzle over it, feeling for the tears there, and stood close to me until I was cried out.

Tomasa has since headed south to live out her days in a field with other horses. After being an athlete for so long, she has earned the right to just be a horse again. Her coat has gotten fuzzy from wearing fewer blankets, being conditioned for outside living, for less grooming, and less human interaction. I hope she will adjust easily, that her heart doesn't ache like mine because I will no longer get to see her every day. I'm not ready to say goodbye, to lose this friend and partner, this family member, but I will try and emulate her resilience. Even though I can no longer ride her, it seems that she is still teaching me things I need to know about compassion and about acceptance. Perhaps her last lesson to me is a simple one: that greener pastures lie ahead. <3>

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