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Chapter **1**

Welcome to the World of Horses

It's hard to find a person alive and breathing who doesn't have a strong reaction to horses. Most people love their power and grace; some find them soulful and irresistible; others find them scary and intimidating. Regardless of whether their response to horses is positive or negative, most people can't help but have an opinion about these dramatic creatures.

What is it about horses that elicits such intense reactions in people? The more thoughtful among equiphiles have pondered this for ages. Perhaps their combination of power and grace is what intrigues people. Or their sheer mass and speed may attract others. Some — such as Audrey Pavia, your humble, nonvet coauthor — believe the close connection between the human and equine races is an expression of genetic memory. After all, without the horse, many of our human ancestors would not have survived.

Although people no longer need horses to transport them from place to place, plow their fields, and carry them into war, they still need to understand them. Those of us who have chosen to live with these beautiful animals have an obligation to care for them properly and enjoy them for all they are worth. In this chapter, we introduce you to the wonderful world of horses.

Looking at a Horse's Build and Mind

You need to understand a horse's body and brain to appreciate what he is all about. In horses, the same as with other creatures, the two are closely linked. Horse people are obsessed with their horses' bodies because a horse's physical structure determines not only his appearance but also his ability to function with a rider.

Horse people have a lingo all their own when describing horses, and knowing this terminology is important for communicating effectively on the topic of horses. Each part of the horse's body has a name to describe it. Knowing the parts of the horse helps you understand and be understood by your horse's veterinarian, farrier (horseshoer), and horsy friends. People in the equine world also use specific language to describe a horse's measurements, colors, markings, and movements.



TIP

Chapter 2 has a diagram showing the parts of the horse. Before you embark on your new hobby, take a look at this diagram and memorize it. You'll be glad you did.

The horse's mind is just as important as his body because the brain controls everything the body does. When you're riding a horse, this reality becomes evident very quickly. Primitive ancestors of today's horses were seen as potential meals by a great many predators, and today's domestic horse has retained that information in his DNA. The consequence is that horses can be flighty, especially when they find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings or faced with an object or situation that makes them uncertain. The motto of just about every horse out there is "Run first, ask questions later." Knowing that motto is extremely important if you choose to sit on the back of one of these half-ton animals.



REMEMBER

Training and experience can override much of the horse's instincts to flee perceived danger, which is why it's so important to ride a horse that has had both — especially when you're a newcomer to horses. It's also imperative that you learn how to ride before you embark on any horseback sojourns, regardless of whether it's on a local trail or through the mountains of Mongolia. Knowing how to handle a horse can mean the difference between a wonderful, relaxing experience and one you'll spend your lifetime trying to forget.

To find out more about how the horse thinks, see Chapter 2.

Checking Out Various Horse Breeds

Horses, like dogs, come in a wide variety of breeds — more than 300 the world over, in fact. Some breeds have existed for centuries, while others were developed only during the last 20 years or so. Each breed has its own characteristics that make it unique, leaving horse people with a healthy selection of breeds to admire. Knowing a thing or two about the various breeds of horses helps you choose the right horse when the time comes for you to join the ranks of horse owners.

Although most horse breeds were developed in Europe and other parts of the world, a number of breeds are uniquely American. Among these is the world's most populous breed, the American Quarter Horse. In the nearly 70 years since this versatile breed officially was established in the U.S., it has spread to a number of other nations. The second most popular breed in the U.S. is the Paint Horse. A spinoff of the Quarter Horse, the colorful Paint's popularity has shot up to high numbers in the past 15 years.

Other breeds in the top 10 include the Appaloosa, Arabian, Miniature Horse, Morgan, Saddlebred, Standardbred, Tennessee Walking Horse, and Thoroughbred. Each breed has a distinct history and appearance and appeals to a vast number of horse lovers.

For more details on the top 10 breeds, see Chapter 3. That same chapter also provides information on some lesser-kept breeds such as the Peruvian Paso, the Friesian, the warmblood, and draft-horse and pony breeds.

Making a Match with the Perfect Horse

The choice you make in a horse to ride can make a huge difference in whether you come to love this hobby or dislike it. Choosing a horse is much like choosing a mate: If you pick the wrong one, you won't be happy.

Asking a few questions before you buy

Before you embark on the tremendous responsibility of horse ownership, make certain owning a horse is really what you want. Ask yourself some questions before you take the plunge:

- » Why do I want a horse?
- » Do I have the time and money for a horse?

- » How do I want to ride (English, Western, shows, on trail), and how do I want to learn the riding style of my choice?
- » Who will take care of the horse on a daily basis?
- » Might leasing be a better option than buying?

For more guidance on what to ask yourself and on other issues to consider before buying a horse, see Chapter 4.

Locating the right horse for you



REMEMBER

The single most crucial aspect to finding the right horse is getting the help of someone with experience. Without expert help, as a novice horse person, you're likely to make the wrong decisions about which horse is best suited for you.

Ideally, the person who helps you with your decision will be a *horse trainer*, someone who makes a living riding, training, and evaluating horses. If you can't find a horse trainer to help you, a riding instructor, an equine veterinarian, a farrier, or someone with years of horse experience under his or her belt is your best bet.

You'll find available horses in any number of outlets, including:

- » Classified ads from individuals in equine publications
- » On the Internet
- » Through trainers and breeders
- » At horse shows
- » Via horse adoption groups

For more details about shopping for a horse, see Chapter 5.

Purchasing horse supplies

After you purchase your own horse, you'll need all the accoutrements to go with him. There is no shortage of stuff out there that you can buy for your horse. For starters, you'll need these basics:

- » Saddle and pad
- » Bridle (the headgear used on a horse during riding)

- »» Halter and lead rope (which provide control when you're working with your horse on the ground)
- »» Grooming supplies

You'll also need some stuff for yourself:

- »» Riding boots or shoes
- »» Riding pants and shirt
- »» A helmet (if you're smart and want to continue to be that way)

All these items can be purchased in your local tack and feed store, through mail-order catalogs or over the Internet, among other options. For more details on these and other items for you and your horse, see Chapter 6.

Housing your horse

Where to keep your horse is a primary concern. If you're like thousands of horse owners around the country who live in an urban or suburban community, a boarding stable is your only option. Choosing the right boarding stable for your horse is important because the place where he's kept will determine his health, his safety, and how much you enjoy of him.

When considering a boarding stable, look for the following:

- »» Safe, sturdy accommodations
- »» Clean, safe surroundings
- »» Security
- »» Water and quality feed
- »» Good care
- »» Health requirements
- »» Riding facilities
- »» Tack storage
- »» Professional demeanor

But if you live on property zoned for horses and have or plan to build horse facilities, the answer is easy: You can keep your horse at home. You have the choice of housing your horse outdoors or indoors. In either case, you need to provide him

with a safe enclosure and shelter from the elements. You're also responsible for feeding him every day and cleaning up after him.



TIP

If you don't have room on your property for a riding arena, you need access to a community arena or one belonging to a neighbor. Finding room to ride is especially important when you're new to horses because you need a place to ride where you feel safe and comfortable before you head out onto the trail.

For more details about boarding your horse or keeping him at home, see Chapter 7.

Taking Great Care of Your Horse

Cowboys in the movies make horse care look easy. After a long gallop, they jump off their horses and leave them standing in the street while they head to the saloon for some refreshments. In reality, horses need plenty of care to stay happy and healthy, and as a horse owner, you're the one to provide it.

Handling daily tasks

If you keep your horse at home, you'll be caring for him on a daily basis. Your most important duties include feeding, providing fresh water, and picking up manure.



TIP

If your horse is in a large pasture, he won't need to get out for exercise every day. But if he is confined to a stall or paddock, part of your job will be to ride him, walk him, or provide him with exercise in some other way, preferably on a daily basis.

Chapter 8 provides intricate details on caring for your horse's daily needs.

Grooming your horse

An important part of horse care is grooming. A well-groomed horse looks good and usually feels good too. Grooming gives you a chance to spend quality time with your horse and keep an eye on his body for any changes that can indicate disease.

Grooming involves both caring for your horse's body and managing his mane and tail. Hoof care is an essential part of grooming that requires you to clean out your horse's feet on a daily basis. In addition, it's a good idea to bathe your horse on a regular basis. You may also want to clip his hair during the winter if you live in a warm climate.

For details about how to groom your horse, see Chapter 9.

Treating your horse's illnesses

Despite their size and imposing presence, horses are fragile creatures that often become sick or injured. Preventive care is important for horses, and it includes:

- » Routine vaccinations against a variety of equine ailments
- » Deworming to get rid of harmful parasites
- » Regular dental care to ensure that teeth are in good health
- » Proper hoof care
- » Quality feed and fresh water
- » Regular exercise

As a horse owner, your job is being able to recognize signs of illness in your horse and calling a vet immediately whenever your horse is ill. Some signs that you need to call the vet include:

- » Diarrhea
- » Inability to stand
- » Indications of pain in your horse's abdomen, known as colic
- » Labored breathing
- » Limping (known as lameness)
- » Refusal to eat
- » Straining to urinate or defecate
- » Swollen, painful eyes

For more information on preventive care for your horse, see Chapter 10. For details on common equine ailments, see Chapter 11.

Knowing when to part with your horse

It may be hard to imagine now, but the time may come when you want or need to say goodbye to your horse. You may need to part ways because you've outgrown him and need a mount more suited to your current skill level, because your financial situation has changed and you can no longer afford him, or (worse yet) because he has a terminal illness that can't be cured.



REMEMBER

If you need to sell your horse, do it in a way that ensures he will have a good home, and won't end up in the slaughterhouse — a fate that befalls many unwanted horses. Some of your options for your horse include

- » Selling
- » Leasing
- » Donating to a program
- » Gifting to a family member
- » Retiring

If your horse is sick, in pain, and can no longer be helped by veterinary medicine, consider euthanasia. This humane way of ending a horse's life is the kindest thing you can do for your old friend.

For more details on giving up your horse, see Chapter 12.

Riding Your Horse Safely and Easily

Horse handling is a skill perfected with training and experience. Receiving the right kind of training and instruction from a qualified expert is important for getting the most from the time you spend with horses. After you have some knowledge under your belt, you can safely handle your horse in a variety of situations. Remember that horses are large animals, and it takes some know-how to deal with them.

Working with your horse from the ground

Before you can ride your horse, you need to handle him from the ground. Given that your horse outweighs you by something like 10 times, it's a good idea to know how to properly deal with him when you're standing at his side.

If you pay close attention to the info we provide about buying a horse in Chapter 5, you can acquire an animal that has what horse people call good ground manners. A horse with good ground manners maintains a proper distance from you — doesn't crowd your space — and respects you as the authority when you're leading him or working around him. In turn, you need to know how to handle your horse

properly so you don't confuse him or inadvertently put yourself in harm's way. Make sure you know to succeed at:

- » Approaching your horse in a stall or pasture
- » Haltering your horse
- » Leading your horse
- » Tying your horse
- » Longeing your horse

Flip to Chapter 13 for full details on handling your horse on the ground.

Looking at riding basics

Getting up on a horse's back can be exciting. It can also be frustrating and scary if you don't know what you're doing. Learning to ride in a formal setting is crucial, because qualified instructors know how to properly teach you riding basics.

Your first decision is determining in which riding discipline you'd like to learn; Chapter 14 has complete information on different riding disciplines. English style riding is made up of several subtypes, including dressage, hunt seat, and saddle seat.

- » Hunt seat is used by people who want to jump their horses, although plenty of hunt-seat riders don't jump — they simply enjoy this style of riding.
- » Dressage is an ancient discipline that's growing in popularity among English riders in the U.S. It emphasizes grace and athleticism in the horse.
- » Saddle-seat riders tend to ride a certain type of horse, one that tends to have high leg action. Many saddle-seat riders show their horses.
- » Western riding, the most popular of all the disciplines, is often the style of choice for beginning riders, because Western saddles provide the most security. Western riding is popular with casual trail riders, as well as those working with cattle.



TIP

Part of your equine education will include learning to saddle and bridle your horse; see Chapter 15 for more details. When you have hoisted yourself into the saddle, you are ready to start riding. For most people, this is what being around horses is all about. Of course, doing it right takes education and practice. You can get an idea of the basics of mounting and riding in the different disciplines by reading Chapter 16.

Staying safe on your horse

Horseback riding has been deemed one of the most dangerous sports, and it results in a significant number of serious injuries to people every year. For this reason, safety when riding is crucial.

One way to ensure that you have a safe ride on your horse is wear the proper apparel. Footwear designed especially for riding is mandatory. Proper footwear can keep you from getting caught up in the stirrups and being dragged if your horse becomes out of control.



A riding helmet is an important part of safety apparel. Most horse-related accidents involve head injuries, and more than one rider has ended up in a vegetative state as a result of a blow to the head when falling off a horse. Helmets designed specifically for riders can protect your valuable grey matter in the event of an accident.

Knowing the proper way to handle a horse — on the ground and in the saddle — also increases your odds of staying safe while participating in your new hobby. Don't skimp on getting a good education on how to ride and handle horses. You should find out how to do the following:

- » Care for a horse's hooves
- » Handle yourself when you're in close quarters with a horse
- » Lead a horse
- » Move around a tied horse
- » Check your tack
- » Ride safely by yourself and with others

You find details on all of these topics and more in Chapter 17.