

SAFETY MATTERS!

by Kitty Ferguson, MD, FAAP, (reprinted from Summer 1998 USPC News)

WANTED: The Perfect Pony for a 6-year-old D-1 who plans to be an A someday. Must be safe for a beginner, talented enough for preliminary horse trials, guaranteed to stay sound for at least 10 years...

Right! Buying a horse is one of the more stressful things Pony Club parents are asked to do.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we only had to do it once? Unfortunately, trying to avoid repeating this chore is one of the most serious mistakes parents can make. Trying to make one horse meet the changing needs of the child can mean compromising safety. The unflappable 14 hand solid citizen who gives a D-2 confidence to trot over an 'X' may not be safe if asked to fly a prelim fence on cross-country! Conversely, the talented upper level horse could seriously injure or frighten our D-2.

So, what do we look for? First is a realistic assessment of the child. A young child, or a novice rider of any age, needs a mount that is friendly, quiet and unflappable. Far too many accidents occur when handling unruly ponies on the ground. Training should not be expected to correct bad habits or a skittish temperament, both of which are unacceptable in a mount for a beginner. The child and pony need to fit each other physically, too. A horse that is either too large or too small can make

the rider less secure. Unfortunately, a pony can be outgrown in a very short period of time. (See the *D Manual*, pp. 14-20).

Experience is another issue affecting safety. 'Learning together' is not a good idea with a sport as potentially dangerous as riding. Well-schooled ponies are often expensive, but are probably worth it! Looking to other disciplines for well-broke horses with good temperaments can be a good compromise when looking for Pony Club mounts. (One great D-level pony we owned came off a pack string!)

Older horses can be excellent teachers. This raises the question of soundness. (After a lifetime of horses, I don't believe there is such a thing as a perfectly sound horse, but perhaps I've just paid too many vet bills.) The horse must be sound enough to safely perform the tasks required. A retired hunter may be a little short behind, but can he safely carry a child to the C-1 level? Having a realistic discussion with the vet, including the type of work likely to be expected of the horse, will help you decide.

Judgment is required to determine if a particular horse or horse/rider combination is unsafe. Pony Club members DO show up on unsuitable mounts! It is the responsibility of leadership to obtain input from knowledgeable horsemen and act on it. No one wants to be the 'bad guy,' but if an unsafe situation exists, it must not be allowed to continue. We had a horse come to our club that

habitually reared. If that rearing horse had flipped over and injured the child, I (then the DC) would have felt responsible. As it was, I was just unpopular. Oh, well!

Horses are large, unpredictable animals and riding is a high-risk sport. Pony Club is all about participating in this wonderful sport as safely as possible. Buying the safest, most appropriate horse you can afford is one way to reduce the risks. A cheap horse is not always a bargain.

Anyone who has owned horses knows the purchase price is a small part of the total investment. A sane, safe beginner mount will always be in

demand when you need to move up to a bigger or more athletic animal for your advancing Pony Club member.

