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Rescuing Horses

Why rescue horses?

It must seem obvious for most of us. They need us. Emotionally it feels good to help our equid companions. Their large eyes appeal to us to the core, as if we can see into their souls. The wild horses need us to manage them, study them. Horses nourish our souls. Why wouldn't we want to help another being, our extended family?

First, we must ask ourselves if it is practical for my intimate human family to donate their resources to help an animal. Taking on the responsibility of a horse requires up to 20 years or more of commitment. Horses are living longer with the better nutrition, parasite control, agricultural knowledge, veterinary, and farrier care. Are you ready for this long term relationship?

How to rescue horses.

A priority is to analyze your resources (realistically) - can you pay for feed, bedding, veterinary care, farrier care, and boarding? You may be able to place that horse in your backyard now. What if you become injured, sick, divorced, or a family member needs intense medical care. These are all situations that may dictate boarding your horse(s). Consider providing for this horse when you can't. Who will want it or care for it if something happens to you? Can you leave it in your will to someone else?

Next determine where to get a horse from. Your equine professionals-veterinarian, farrier, nutritionist, MSPCA, or trainer may know of a horse in need or situations where you could foster a horse without a lifetime commitment. This can be very satisfying and potentially helpful to someone going through a tough time. Everyone wins with this arrangement.

What to look for in a horse to adopt.

Degenerative joint disease, OCD, fractures, tumors, or Lyme disease could exist in a horse that needs to be rescued. Lameness exams, ultrasound, surgery, biopsies, MRIs, radiographs, and other procedures may be needed on your new mount.

Nutritionally weakened horses are perhaps the easiest to take on with the most reward. It's important to know if there is something major or unknown that could make the endeavor cost prohibitive. It's wise to have a prepurchase exam done on a horse you wish to rescue or help place. Remember, a free horse is free (or cheap) for a reason.

Where to find your horse: Make a deliberate study of this before you jump.

Are you going to rescue from the auctions, an adoption organization, a private party, or a race track? Each has rewards and pitfalls. Auctions have traditionally been places where someone places an animal that they can't sell, or don't have time to sell. Often, great undiscovered horses are found there—diamonds in the rough. Most of us can't think of a better scenario. Beware the horses, however, that are dangerous, been sold many times, or just never trained, and therefore could be dangerous. Experienced horsemen can have trouble discerning one from another in the auction environment.

Racehorses have their own set of problems. We love watching races—those horses work so hard. They run with their hearts. But many of them have not been vaccinated or cared for like your horse. They've been trained quickly and effectively for their endeavor, not yours. You don't get an accurate history about their behavior or medical or training issues. You don't know if that horse will rear over backwards and fall on top of you the first time you get on it. You don't know if it got injected with something it shouldn't have, has been given illegal drugs, racing with fractures or has suffered any breakdowns (or is about to). A track breakdown is a catastrophic injury that can be race ending or life ending. Ask around, these things do happen and when it does happen, they cost potentially thousands of dollars in medical care. If it has fractures, are you able to give it the care it need? Is your health care team? Do you have the ability to retrain and rehabilitate it? Are you ready for this? Again, a prepurchase exam would be the best thing to do. The exam helps point out issues that could be major problems or help set realistic expectations for the new horse. Please ask your veterinarian for details.

If your veterinarian, farrier, nutritionist or trainer, recommend a horse to you, chances are, they will know a lot about the horse. They also know you. Make your desires, and resources known to these professionals. They can help you more than you know. In Massachusetts, the MSPCA helps people find a horse that may work for them. Their adoption center is always full, but they are a powerful network for needy animals.

What do I have to do for my own horses?

Much like kids in school, there are infectious diseases anywhere there are a lot of horses. Some will be spread to your horses, some are deadly (Streptococcus equi., Equine Herpes Virus, Equine Arteritis Virus, Equine Infectious Anemia). This is when you should have your own horses vaccinated or tested first. Vaccinate them for EWT, WNV, Strangles(Streptococcus equi), Influenza, Rhino,(Equine Herpes Virus) and Rabies. Allow them time to be immunologically protected. This could take up to 8 weeks for adult horses and longer for foals. Allow 4-8 weeks of isolation or quarantine for the new addition(s) before they come into contact with your horse. Nose to nose contact is not isolation.

When you take your new horse home, allow it time to see, hear, and smell your horse(s). This can happen during isolation. Your horse will smell them from another barn. Again, nose to nose contact, immediately, is still not wise. Because they are a prey species, they are keenly aware of their surroundings, much more than you or I am. If they see the new arrival periodically, that will be enough to let them know, that someone new is nearby. By the time isolation is over, they should be able to be together without too much fuss. If your new horse is thin, it may be a good idea to leave them separate longer, so there is no direct competition for food.

Be aware that everything you do with your new horse could be its first time. Maybe it never had its feet trimmed, teeth floated, had a western saddle, been in a stall, heard your radio. Maybe it's just been separated from its only pasture mate of 15 years. Can you imagine what that might be like? Be patient, give it great experiences. **Always** end on a good note when handling it. Don't start a battle you can't win. Be this horse's savior. Rescue can be one of the most rewarding things you'll ever do. Do it wisely and you may just begin the best relationship in your life.