

A Horse of Your Own

This is written for people who have never owned horses before. If you have, most of this is going to sound obvious. This is also aimed at non-expert riders and at those who do not have an unlimited budget.

A horse of your own is a daunting step to take, but at the right time it is well worth it. Before you take that step, take stock of whether you are ready for it.

How well do you ride? You ought to be at least a solid intermediate (unless you intend to buy a large, expensive, non-working pet). Beginners in particular ought to have experience on many different horses, and even advanced riders gain some insight into horses and riding by not riding on the same horse all the time. On the other hand, at a certain point, the experience of working with your own horse gives you opportunities and experiences that you will never have until you have your own horse. Having your own horse enables you to develop teamwork.

First off, can you afford a horse? Upkeep on a horse is not free. They are big and fussy. They eat a lot and require other not-cheap maintenance.

The least expensive way to manage this is if you have the zoning and adequate acreage to pasture board your horse on your own land. Just being out in the country is not enough. Check with your local zoning laws to determine if you have the acreage to keep a horse (which may vary per local laws). Even if you can mostly let your horse eat grass and live in the pasture, you will need some sort of shelter for the worst weather. A lean-to or run-in may work in some areas and there are relatively cheap semi-permanent and sturdy tents that can hold up even in lake-effect winters (and which shouldn't have impact on your land tax). If you have a shed or garage or old barn, you may be able to convert that. Even if your horse is mostly feeding itself outside, it will still need tack, some grain (if you expect your horse to do any work other than eat all day), hay (at least during Æthelmarc winters), shoes, vet visits, transportation costs, etc. Are you ready to put in the time personally or money to assure the stall is mucked, the horse is fed and watered, exercised, turned out, brought in from bad weather 365 days a year (even when you go to Pennsic)? If you think it is hard finding someone to walk your dog or feed your cat, finding a horse sitter is even more challenging (though it can be done if you are determined).

For those of us who don't live in the country or don't have enough land or the right zoning to keep a horse in the backyard or don't have the time, you will have to board. Costs here also vary greatly, so check around locally. A farmer who keeps a few horses of his own may allow you to pasture board with his horses, and that probably would not run too high but probably would lack some of the amenities you might get at a stable. Even the prices at stables vary. How far are you willing to drive to get out to see your horse? Usually the further out in the country the cheaper it runs. A stable without an indoor arena usually is not as pricy, but that means you are at the mercy of the weather—riding in snow or on ice or in deep mud is not fun and is dangerous to your horse's legs.

Are you willing to not ride a large part of the year? (Getting a horse back in shape if it has been off work all winter will take 2 to 3 months.) Converted cow barns are usually cheaper, but you will need to make sure that the conversion is adequate to your horse's health. (Standing on concrete all day is tough on a horse's legs, but a rubber mat can fix that.) Even within a barn, prices may vary depending on the service you want. If you are willing to muck your own stall, feed and water your own horse, buy its food, exercise it yourself, and do your own turnout, you should get a better price. I don't have that sort of time, so I pay more, but that also means that if I decide to go on vacation all I have to do is say, "Mike, see you in a week," and all that is taken care of. (I still have to arrange for the vet and the ferrier and worming and the horsie dentist—really—and tack cleaning and whatnot, but the freedom is worth the price to me in my situation.)

An alternate method to bring down costs is to barter work for stabling. If you are willing to muck stalls (in addition to your own) and feed and water and do other chores around the barn, you should be able to negotiate a much better deal. Please be aware when you enter into such a deal that stable owners do not have any use for undependable help. Stalls need to be mucked pretty much seven days a week including holidays and Crown Tourney and even when it is below zero, and mucking usually occurs very early in the morning. Putting up hay is hot and scratchy. Breaking ice off horses' water buckets in mid winter is not fun. (However, the up side is if you are a fighter, flinging poop with a muck rake and tossing hay up into the loft is great upper body exercise.) When I was in college I used to do this sort of thing to pay for my riding lessons. I can afford not to now, but I still do it when my barn is short staffed. (Imagine spending a frigid night on Christmas Eve helping dig through the snow and ice and half-frozen mud below that to fix a broken water pipe that is draining the well dry. Then imagine waking up a few hours later on Christmas morning to help muck stalls and water and feed. Been there, done that—recently.) It does teach you a great deal about the other side of horses. And if you are dependable, the stable owner will love you and should give you a great deal.

Horses are not like cars. You have to teach them what to do before they can do it. Can you train a horse? (Meaning, do you have real, hands-on experience? Having a book about training is not the right answer.) If you cannot, do you have access to a trainer you trust? How much is that going to cost?

A good first step for many is to lease or partially lease a horse. Many larger (and some smaller) stables have horses for lease. That gives you some of the experience and many of the advantages of having your own horse without totally committing. Leasing (by yourself or as a time-share) might give you the insight to decide whether or not you are really ready to take that next step. (Hint, if you are doing time share, spell out in writing just what you and anyone else in the deal is responsible for and how you are going to divvy up riding time and chores. If one of you routinely rides before the other and wears the horse down and leaves the tack filthy, it is not going to work out. If you can work as a team and are considerate and flexible, it should work out well.) If leasing (as a singleton or as a timeshare) does not work out, either because your own horse is not the right answer for you at that time or if that particular horse was not the right answer, you

still will have gained valuable experience without going broke or having to figure out how to sell a horse at the end of this experiment.

Can you pseudo-lease a horse? Is there someone with a horse or a number of horses who would be willing to lend you a semi-regular horse (and maybe even lessons) in exchange for help around the barn (see above regarding expectations of work) or other barter (maybe you can make armor for them or garb) or help with the boarding or a trailering bill? There are an increasing number of SCAdians with horses, and many of the games are played only one or two people at a time so it is quite possible to take turns. (Note, how many people can take turns riding one horse on one day at one event without overworking it is not unlimited—it depends on the breed and the horse's conditioning and the weather and what games you are playing at what skill level and the weight of the riders, so don't think you can go in with ten buddies on one horse and ride your shared horse into the ground. We are realistically talking two or three people per horse unless you are all light weights or riding everything at a walk.) If a SCAdian who owns a horse and this thinks you ride adequately so as not to ruin the horse and you can work out the time-share arrangements for an equestrian event, they may be willing to "share" their horse with you. If you do enter into such an arrangement, NEVER, EVER forget that it really is the other person's horse—they get first dibs, their word about their horse is law, and you have no right to expect to ride for free.

When you decide it is time to actually buy your own horse, figure out what sort of horse is your dream horse, what sort of horse fits with your riding skill and style, what sort of horse fits with your or your trainer's skill level, what sort of horse you are willing to settle for, and what sort of horse you can afford. You are lucky indeed if all of those are the same answer.

There are indeed ideal horses out there already trained for most styles: e.g., Western, hunter, dressage, trail rides, if you are willing to pay the premium. You are not going to find many horses that have been trained for jousting (although there are even some of those). Assuming that you will want to play medieval games with you horse (or you wouldn't be reading this article) whatever horse you get will be in part a "fix it upper," so be sure whoever is training your horse or helping you train your horse has input when you are trying to come up with your wish list.

Breeds: Romantic as Arabs and other hot blooded breeds are, if you are not an expert, aggressive rider, you may spend more time on the ground than you do on the horse. They are very agile and have much endurance, but if you are not a strong rider, those attributes may not be a good thing. Have your riding teacher or a good rider you respect give you an *honest* appraisal of your riding skills and give yourself an honest appraisal of your patience. Rescue horses (thoroughbreds—also hot bloods) from the track are beautiful animals and not too expensive, but most have a host of bad habits and/or bad legs and hooves from their time on the track and again unless you are an expert and aggressive rider with loads of patience and a good trainer and a good vet and a good farrier, may never be a dependable or a fun ride. There are wonderful exceptions, just be warned. Horses that have been well trained and used extensively for jumping cost a lot, and if

they don't it is usually because their legs and/or hooves are shot. Western horses are usually pretty good for SCA type games; just beware of those that have been trained specifically for barrel racing. Barrel racers are excellent for neck reining and are pretty unflappable, but they come with two caveats. Barrel racing is hard on a horse's legs, so most of those that are being sold have arthritis and/or bad hooves. Barrel racing horses also generally have two speeds, very slow and very fast with nothing in between. The very fast can be disconcerting unless you are a very solid rider (preferably as well trained in barrel riding as your mount), and may not be as controllable as you need for medieval games—and you may never be able to train that sheer “go fast” habit out of them. Draft horses are cold bloods so theoretically are temperamentally easier to work with, but their sheer size means that any errors you make in training or bad habits you don't catch early and don't prevent before they become truly ingrained will come back to haunt and potentially hurt you big time. Not all trainers are open to work with draft horses, particularly not for riding (although here in Æthelmearc, if you live near any Amish, you will probably be able to find someone with that skill). And if it makes you feel any better, draft horses are not really period breeds. Most draft breeds were developed starting at best very late period and flourished much later.

Age: Young, unbroken horses are cheaper than a broken horse, but until you can ride a horse and feel its gaits for yourself you don't really know what you are getting. Also, what you save in purchase cost for a young animal you will probably spend far more in breaking and training if you have never done it yourself (which, if this is really your first horse, is probably true). And lastly, horses take a few years to mature. Unless you are really and truly an expert rider, an older horse (older than 8 but younger than 20) will probably be more reliable. A horse older than 15 may be a right choice for you but should be considered carefully. Such a horse will probably cost less and will probably be more reliable. Most horses are going to live into their mid to late twenties, and some breeds into their early thirties. But if you buy a horse in its late teens or twenties, yes, it will probably be more solid, but it may have leg problems and you cannot expect it to be a high performance horse. It may make a great first horse depending on what you want, only again, just be sure that is what you want. (For a first horse, reliable is probably a better trait to look for than high performance.)

Gender: Geldings are going to be the most consistent, and don't go into heat. Mares tend to be dependable until they do that “go into heat” thing, and when they do most have a very bad attack of PMS. In between their cycles (which occur a few times a year, though most go into heat shortly after they move to a new barn no matter the time of year), they are not usually bonkers. If you do find a mare that is great except when she goes into heat but she seems to be the type that goes into heat frequently, there are drugs that can prevent mares from cycling. Talk to your vet. (And it is not cruel to put them on such medication—such mares are much happier. They can't like PMSing any more than human women do.) Impressive as the image of riding a stallion sounds, resist the urge. Unless you are an expert rider or are serious about establishing a breeding program, a half ton of testosterone is not a good idea for a first horse. Not all stallions can be socialized enough to be trusted with other horses, and you probably will have to arrange for special accommodations for your stud. And lastly, not all barns or events will tolerate a stallion

on site. Other horse owners will hold you responsible for what your horse does, and most mare owners generally either don't intend to breed their horse at all or have definite notions of what they are going to breed her to (and your random stallion is probably not on their list). Male horses clipped late often hang onto some of the mannerisms of stallions even after they have lost the plumbing, so beware.

Where to look: Particularly if you are on a budget, check the bulletin boards in local barns, tack shops, feed shops, and livestock auctions. Check the ads in newspapers and rural "Pennysavers." Check on-line, but remember when you find your "perfect horse" on the far coast, you may be buying the horse "blind" (without the opportunity to ride it first) and will have to bear the cost of shipping. If a local stable is selling a school horse because it is getting old and needs a situation with a lighter work; that could be a perfect first horse for someone who is still in an advanced beginner or intermediate rider stage. Ride the horse yourself, talk to some of the students who have been riding on it, and do get its legs x-rayed before you buy.

Now that you think you may have found the right horse: Ideally, you want to be able to ride the horse you have chosen and also have your trainer (or a person who is both a true expert rider and already a horse owner if you don't have a trainer) ride your potential horse before you buy. If your horse is going to cost more than \$1,000, it may well be worth it to have your horse "vetted out" before your buy. "Vetting" a horse means having a vet check out your potential horse. If you are looking an expensive horse, do get your horse vetted, it is well worth it. It is prudent to have the vet who is doing the vetting *not* to be the regular vet for the old owner (to avoid a conflict of interests). How much of a vetting process you want is up to you; talk it over with your vet—it will depend on how much you are paying and other circumstances regarding that specific horse (age, past work, bad habits, etc.). In particular, horses are prone to leg and hoof problems, and it is smart to at least have the legs x-rayed. A Coggins test should be negative. And sometimes doing an examination of the horse's upper airways (bronchoscopy) may be indicated.

Examples out of personal experience:

I paid \$1,000 for a horse that the owner of the barn we were leasing a pony from (for the kids) was selling. I got the opportunity to ride her myself before I bought and not have her vetted. (The vet bill would have come to more than what I paid, and if it turned out a wrong choice, I wouldn't have lost too much money...) Tiki ended up being a spectacularly lucky choice, but I will not pretend she has not taken a lot of work and patience. As best we can tell she is a part Morgan, part Arab (hot blooded) and therefore is prone to "Arab Moments" (a.k.a., spaz attacks), but I am a solid enough rider to manage that usually. She isn't sneaky or malicious; she just startles at the drop of a hat (or anything else). Her legs and hooves were solid, her conformation is exceptional, and her mouth was soft. She was smart, pretty (a liver chestnut), and is an exemplification of what a baroque/medieval horse should look like. She is small, 14.3 hh, meaning one inch larger than pony size—but actually that is just about the perfect size for a medieval jousting horse (though I wasn't thinking jousting at that time, I just personally didn't

want a huge horse). She was the deal she was because she has no papers and because she was “broken” by people who had never owned a horse before and were training her out of a book. She hadn’t been mistreated and hadn’t turned mean; she just did not know her job. We moved to a new barn, and my new trainer has worked with Arabs and Arab breeds most of his life (and had the Arab National Champion one year). Still, it took a year of us working with her constantly until I could begin to canter her consistently. (Cantering in anything except a straight line is not natural for a horse, and she just had never been taught how to balance at a canter. It would have been easier and quicker to fix if she had not been allowed to develop sloppy habits, but then she probably would not have been for sale at the price I paid.) For the first year, I only dared climb into the saddle after I had lunged her at least 20 minutes to get some of the edge and high energy level off her. Anytime she went into heat (which was often that first year), she became a crazy woman of which even my trainer was leery. I was determined and committed to the long haul, and believe that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. Most important, I have a talented trainer and was willing to do what he told me to do when I was riding and was willing to buy into what he felt was important to do in her training. Still, it took about a year for me to feel reasonably comfortable on her. (Another woman in our barn got a similarly high spirited Arab—but much higher priced—horse at the same time I did, she was not as determined, she fought our trainer, and let the horse bully her. She never did get to enjoy her horse and ended up ruining what could have been a phenomenal horse for the right rider.) As for me, several years and lots of miles and ages of work later, I can get my Tiki to do most anything including saddleseat, dressage with lateral work, driving, reining, and jousting (except she doesn’t like to jump). All that energy has mellowed out, even when she goes into heat (well, mostly), so I no longer have to spend that much time lunging her, if at all. Even now there remain a few “scary” times as far as she is concerned, like when the snow is sliding off the roof or during a hail storm, when I just don’t even bother to saddle her up. At this point, however, most days I can work her a bit, and feel secure at putting beginners up on her at a walk (though her trot is “animated” so more than most beginners like, and she is lazy so really has to be convinced to go into her canter—though it is as smooth as silk when she does go into it). Like most Arabs and Arab breeds, she does have tremendous endurance. And all the work I have put into her has made me a much better rider.

When my daughter outgrew the pony we had been leasing, she wanted a jumper. My daughter was young and had visions of a “beautiful white Arab” (yes, I know that technically there are no “white” horses). We went on-line, checked out any number of Arabs, made the trips, rode a few, and weren’t impressed (except by the prices they expected). Decent jumpers are not easy to find, and when put to her, my daughter chose jumper over Arab. At that point a woman at our barn told us of some thoroughbreds available in Maryland that were jumpers. We sent for the videos and decided it was worth the 8 hour trip to check out several prospects. The horse my daughter had pegged as her number one choice was already sold by the time we got there a couple weekends later. The number two horse was more than our budget, and not a comfortable ride. A third horse (a gelding that wasn’t on the video we got) was instant chemistry. Killian is rangy gray (who would be almost “white” if horse were called white but only when he hasn’t been rolling in the mud or his own poop) and his mane looks like a punk hairdo,

though his tail (when cleaned up) is long and silky—so much for the “beautiful white Arab.” He is a track rescue horse and had been already converted to a hunter, but had a hard time turning right so he was being sold. It was obvious to us that someone just hadn’t the patience to teach a track horse that was used to the left hand turns of racing how to pick up his right canter lead. We had him vetted, and he was sound. We bought him. He has had his ups and downs. It took him only a couple months for our trainer to get him cantering right lead. He is a great jumper and loves jumping (though he is of the opinion that every jump is at least four feet high, even the thin beam of sunlight on the floor or a stick, which can be a surprise to the unwary). On the down side, he developed string halt (a neurologic gait problem that can afflict thoroughbreds) in a rear leg. He had a mind of his own and it takes a strong rider to keep him in line which my daughter usually is, however there were any number of days particularly early on when he won and the standing mantra was “Stoopid horse for sale, one dollar or best offer.” A few years of consistent work and despite the string halt and with the right bit, he had become a very talented ride. He is a very strong horse, which is good when he is jumping, but not good when he is acting up. Even after much work he still demands a strong and fearless rider.

My horse was a spur-of-the-moment decision and my daughter’s was a couple months of looking. My husband (the Laurel—and a knight) researched medieval horses extensively and decided he wanted a Frisian. Frisians can be dated to the end of Period in a charge of lancers on Frisians. Classic Frisians such as my husband wanted are baroque and very large; meaning almost workhorse size, but our trainer is experienced at breaking and training even workhorses, so that was not so daunting. The trick was finding one in a reasonable price range (which when you talk Frisians, reasonable is still not a cheap date). After a year of searching on-line he finally found one in Virginia. This horse was a gorgeous gelding and had a wonderful personality and riding him was pleasure and our trainer approved, and so we had him vetted out. Leg x-rays showed that he had sustained a hairline fracture of a bone just above the hoof at some time in the past and therefore was at very high risk for developing ringbone. We weren’t about to pay that kind of money (not even when deeply discounted after this finding) for a horse that would almost certainly end up lame in a few years. Worse, we could not imagine investing that kind of love in an animal knowing we might well have to retire him if not put him down in the years that should be his prime. By sheer luck not that long after, my husband found another Frisian (also a gelding) that actually was more horse but again deeply discounted because the previous owner was a tiny woman who suddenly realized that she had more horse than she could control. Riding him at the walk and trot were good, but he had originally been trained to drive, and such horses are taught to resist the urge to canter. His new owner had eventually gotten him to canter, but like my horse when we got her, he just wasn’t very skilled at it. His owner couldn’t deal with it for riding him at a canter which back then vaguely resembled being on a roller coaster. He vetted clean. He has a great temperament (if you can imagine a 1,300 pound lap dog—that is Roman) and a good work ethic; only he is a very baroque horse with a huge trot and a huge canter (even though it is now balanced and somewhat smoothed out from the roller coaster, it is still a lot of movement). Lots of time and work and professional training and my husband had a gorgeous horse that can do first level dressage, including canter and lateral work, and was beginning to work on second level. Still, Roman’s action (meaning his big trot and huge

canter) meant that he was not ever going to be a great medieval jousting horse; he is just too bouncy when you ride him to aim a lance or sword accurately in anything but a walk. And his canter, though balanced and splashy if you are talking high level dressage, was just too large for my husband to ride comfortably for trail rides or medieval games. Also a big horse, he also does not have as much “battery” as my part Arab or my daughter’s thoroughbred do—moving that much mass is a lot of work. My daughter and I can ride all day in multiple classes at a horse show, or ride a hunter-pace with no problem and energy to spare, but Roman gets wiped out after one hour of solid work. On the other hand, things that spook and panic my part Arab or my daughter’s thoroughbred, well, Roman is just curious as to whether they are tasty. After a great deal of angst, my husband finally decided that Roman was just not the right horse for him. We should be able to find him a good home doing high level dressage with an experienced dressage fanatic, but he is not a pleasure horse. The good news is that we have a line on another Frisian that is out of another blood line and is a “sweeper” rather than a “prancer,” so appears to have a smoother canter. We have seen the videos, riding “Taco” comes next. Stayed tuned...

None of us got quite the horse we expected, but that was not necessarily a bad thing. All of us became stronger riders for our experience, and two out of three of our choices worked pretty much the way we wanted (which is not bad odds). The third ended up a high end horse, but not what the primary rider needed or wanted. What was important was we were all of the understanding up front that horses are not predictable and require work, and if it does not work out, at some point you have to cut your losses.

To recap, if you are thinking of getting a horse, good for you—but do it sensibly, both for your sake and for the sake of the horse you are going to buy. Plan your budget. Get an honest appraisal of your riding skills, for someone who does well on a sturdy old school horse may not be able to control a fiery hot blood or a temperamental track rescue horse or an ex-barrel racer or a huge workhorse. Figure out what kind of horse is your “dream horse,” but phrase that definition based on what you expect and realistically can handle in performance rather than strictly looks or romantic childhood dreams. Run your ideas past more experienced people—expert riders and other horse owners and trainers. Consider leasing to get an idea of what you will be getting in to. When you do go to buy a horse, take someone with experience with you, preferably a trainer but if not a good rider with experience in owning a horse. Ride the horse. If it seems to be what you want, consider having it vetted if it is not a bargain basement horse. If it is an older horse or has been used for something like barrel racing or jumping or is a track rescue horse, do at least get its legs x-rayed. Realize that horses, like children, are works in progress. It is a very rare (or very expensive) horse that you are just going to be able to hop up on and have do high performance work—or even not such high end but reliable performance work. Most horses are going to take work (to the tune of months if not years or never if you have selected the wrong horse or you do not have the patience or skill) to get them to do what you want reliably. If you are not a totally fearless rider, consider a smaller or older horse as a first horse. Think gelding or mare (in that order), not stallion.

Despite the list of caveats, your own horse is a wonderful thing. Planning and thinking things through beforehand will make it all the better.