

THINKING ABOUT RETIREMENT?

Your horse has worked his heart out for you and is now ready for retirement, but are you? Often the decision to retire your horse is an obvious one. An injury or personal turn of events may force you to stop riding and begin to consider retirement options. Sometimes the decision isn't as clear.

Many healthy, happy horses are now living much longer than they use to, some well into their 30's and on rare occasion their 40's. These statistics represent almost twice the expected normal life span. With so many horses living well beyond riding years, how do you provide for your senior companion?

I have a friend who had to retire her favorite gelding who recently turned 30. She had begun to notice a general slowing down and the horse began to stumble with greater frequency. My friend knew she could never sell her equine friend. He had provided comfort when her mom passed away, standing quietly content on many mornings, understanding her grief and allowing her tears to soak his mane. She was committed to her horse and his care. Luckily, my friend had sufficient pasture to allow her horse to live out his senior years under her watchful eye in a comfortable environment.

Most of us, however, don't have the property to retire our horses, so how do we create a happy ending of our own? If you have a horse and retirement time has arrived, there are many options and a number of misconceptions to consider.

The most common misconception is that a senior horse requires less care. The reality is that an aged horse may have more requirements to maintain good health and comfort. Stacy Johnson has spent the last 15 years focusing on the retired equine and she stresses the importance of owners looking down the road realistically. She says that, "Having personally had a mare live to be 46 years old, I know that owners need to understand that most horses, cared for properly, can live a very long time. It is important to budget for their care, and the likelihood that they may still require some costly attention as they age normally".

According to Dr. Jim Williams DMV, there are three major considerations in a senior horse health care program. " 1) Make sure the horse's mouth is as comfortable as possible. Even if teeth have expired or have had to be extracted due to gingival disease the horse can have a good quality of life with minimal discomfort. Gingivitis and/or loose teeth can cause poor weight gain and even weight loss. 2) If your horse is arthritic, injectable

anti-arthritic drugs can help improve mobility. 3) Although not all retired horses need to be shod, proper hoof care such as trimming and shoeing when necessary are essential." Dr. Williams also encourages routine check-ups with your veterinarian and immediate calls if there is a sudden change in the horses behavior or physical condition.

Many people (including myself) feel that pasture life and a return to freedom is the kindest gift we can offer a retired horse. While this may be true for many horses, it is not a lifestyle suitable for all. Senior horses can fall to the bottom of the pecking order and may therefore not be able to fight for their food. This could result in detrimental weight loss. Older horses also often require a longer period of time to eat their feed and if so it is important to keep younger horses away from the senior food supply. And, a show horse that has lived in a box stall his entire life might find transition to pasture too drastic and stressful. If they do not adjust quickly to the new and strange environment with a new herd of horses they may also experience additional stress and weight loss during an extended period of adjustment.

Stacy Johnson is well versed in the requirements for a period of adjustment and she advises that "It is of great importance to introduce the new horse gradually and allow for what I call the "meet and greet to be done over a common fence line -- one sturdy enough to withstand a lot of noisy and sometimes pushy 'hellos' and 'who are you' with your current herd. New horses should have a space of their own to acclimate to their new environment, future roommates, and of course their new caregiver. Once horses can share a common fence without any squealing, striking, or carrying on, the new horse can usually slip into the herd without any fear. It also greatly reduces the possibility of any "formal" initiation from the current Alpha equine in the already established group."

And, let's not overlook the fact that all pastures are not created equal and may vary drastically in the quality of their forage. Even with excellent forage, horses without back molars cannot process tall grasses and so will require supplemental feeding all year long. And during the spring when the grasses are rich in protein, horses need to be monitored closely to prevent founder and should often only be allowed to graze for a few hours a day.

These days, there are a number of non-profits as well as for profit retirement facilities that cater to senior horses and their special needs. If you consider a specialized horse retirement facility, make sure you investigate it fully. Take a close look at the lay of the land, drainage, quality of feed and storage, knowledge of caretakers, emergency care, shelters, adequate room for your horse to roam and visiting hours. Don't put your senior horse in a place where they will be confined to a stall.

Older horses need to be able to move to maintain muscle tone and flexibly and keep joints limber. Arthritis will be much worse for a senior horse living in a box stall.

Before any such move it is wise to consult with a team of equine professionals -- including your veterinarian, farrier, and trainer -- for assessments regarding what kind of retirement situation will be best for your horse. Your horse's soundness, dental condition, and previous environment all need to be considered. A good retirement facility will evaluate each new resident carefully and design a customized health care plan with each horse's best interest in mind.

Therapeutic Riding programs may be another option for retirement if your horse can still be ridden and has a gentle disposition. Equine Guided Education programs often need horses that can work in a variety of situations such as youth-at-risk, corporate team building, and leadership development. If your horse is accepted by this kind of specialty program you can be sure the horse will lead a life of value, being well cared for and loved.

In her book, "Horse Sense for the Leader Within," Ariana Strozzi writes, "As our industrial dependence on horses has significantly dwindled, the Horse as a Healer has dramatically increased. It is as if we inherently know that we need them to rekindle our psycho-spiritual vitality. We are remembering that they connect us to the natural world, to compassion, to love and honesty. We are witnessing the transformation of the modern horse as these powerful animals become teachers, healers, coaches, mentors and body workers. The emergence of programs that involve horses as emotional and spiritual guides increased by over 300 percent between 2001 and 2003."

If a retirement facility or a therapeutic riding program aren't right for your horse don't give up. There are other possibilities. You might consider putting the word out that you have a retirement horse available as a companion horse. If someone only has one horse in their backyard they might welcome a buddy to provide company. And, there are also a number of non-profit horse rescue organizations offering adoptions and sponsorships to cover the costs of care and feeding. Normally these organizations cater to rescue horses, but if you cannot maintain your horse, you might explore this option.

Retiring your horse doesn't mean having to sell or put your beloved equine partner to sleep. With solid, realistic planning and competent senior horse care, your cherished companion can continue to thrive in a safe, healthy retirement situation. And you can rest in the knowledge that

you have given your best efforts to your old friend who deserves to live out the last years with comfort and dignity.

– Alyssa Aubrey, CEGE

Alyssa is a Certified Equine Guided Educator and co-founder of the Equine Guided Education Association. She is the Executive Director at Medicine Horse Ranch, where she facilitates equine guided leadership and teambuilding programs for business organizations, associations and institutions. Medicine Horse Ranch offers internship and USA HorseDream® licensing programs for individuals seeking to incorporate horses into human personal/ professional development offers.