

Buying a VRH Horse

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Versatility Ranch Horse (VRH). . . The Cowboy's Pentathlon – this five-class multi-skilled event requires a truly versatile horse. The same rider and horse must perform the *dry work classes* of Ranch Riding (RR), Ranch Trail (RT), and Conformation along with the *cattle classes* of Ranch Cutting (RC) and Working Ranch Horse (WRH).

With good conformation, a good mind, and an ability to perform 10 different skill sets within the AQHA's five classes, what is a rider looking for to begin the search for that perfect ranch horse?

Remember that there are no perfect horses. Each horse is an individual with strengths and weaknesses. . . just like us. But, before looking at a VRH horse profile, let's look at the rider.

Candidly, VRH is not an entry-level event for people just learning to ride. Having introduced hundreds of rookie VRH riders and horses to VRH through our *Introduction to VRH Clinic* and skill building program, let me share what I believe to be minimum qualifications to begin your journey in this event:

- 🚩 Ability to have an independent seat with good balance
- 🚩 Ability to use cues and aids appropriately (voice, legs, hands, and spurs if used)
- 🚩 An understanding of how to ask for separate parts of the horse to move
 - Flex head/neck left and right while walking and trotting
 - Turn on the forehand
 - Turn on the hindquarters
 - Sidepass and/or two-track
- 🚩 An understanding of how to effectively ask a horse to go, stop, turn, back up

With quality private instruction, the rider can bring his or her skills up to a level to feel safe and effective for this event.

This is also not an entry-level event for the very green-broke horse. The horse should have:

- 🏆 A willing mind
- 🏆 Control over emotions
- 🏆 An ability to walk, trot, and lope under control
- 🏆 Flex head/neck left and right while walking and trotting
- 🏆 Turn on the forehand
- 🏆 Turn on the hindquarters
- 🏆 Ability to go, stop, turn, back up and move laterally (sidepass/two-track)

A naturally willing mind is a big factor in horses that progress and succeed. Also, in VRH, the horse has to be able to bring its energy level up for the cattle classes and down for the dry work classes. Some horses are born with this ability and others have to learn the emotional control. With good foundation skills and a good mind, the horse is ready to learn the more advanced VRH skills.

Having established the base level for rider and horse, buy the best mind, conformation, and training that you can afford – for your safety, fun, and ability to compete. It's not safe, fun, or competitive for the recreational rider to buy a horse that is too "hot", too dominant, unwilling or in any way not capable of meeting the VRH challenges. Here's what we look for in a horse.

Conformation first. . . The conformation class is 20% of the overall score. Good conformation usually results in good balance and longevity of service. Minor conformation faults can be overcome in performance with heart and willingness.

A good mind is paramount for learning the many skills while keeping the rider safe, relaxed, and able to concentrate on the rider's own learning.

A good skill foundation allows the horse and rider to be effective and grow.

If the horse comes with an advanced skill or two, here's our personal, general observation. . . respecting that each horse is an individual . . .

Working Cow Horses / Reined Cow Horses = Already knows the reining, boxing, going down the rail portion of the WRH class. Cattle control experience helps with the Ranch Cutting class, since the rider is allowed to assist the horse in this class. Check the size of the "motor" for its ability to do the dry work classes.

Cutting Horse = Many recreational riders need to learn balance and control to ride a good cutting horse. Cutting horses can learn the boxing and going down the rail for the WRH class if the rider has the skills and patience to control the horse's natural ability to want to cut. . . The Ranch Riding and Ranch Trail classes and reining portion of the

WRH are frequently new territory for this specialization. Depending upon the horse, cutting bloodlines are frequently "hot".

Rope Horses = Rope horses can be good choices since they are familiar with rating the cow, roping and stopping the cow, working at all gaits, and can be solid minded. Depending upon the type of roping and prior experience, they may be reluctant to go past the cow for the boxing and turns going down the fence in the WRH class. Also, many rope horses are left-led and have some difficulty picking up a right lead. The reining portion of VRH requires flying lead changes. Ability in the dry work classes depends upon the individual horse's "life experiences".

Reining Horses = Reiners can help the rider in the reining portion of the WRH class with spins, stops, rollbacks, flying lead changes already in place. Experienced reiners will frequently need work on the jog, trot, and extended trot since this is not a gait that is emphasized by many trainers. Be sure to check the degree of natural cow ability.

Western Pleasure Class Horses = For horses bred for this event, the mind can be somewhat resistant to "picking up the pace" to do the cattle classes. Prior training reinforces slow gaits. Some pleasure horses have been trained with the head/neck carriage below the VRH rules of carrying the head no lower than the withers and traveling with forward motion at a working speed. However, with some adjustments, these horses do well in the Ranch Riding Class and the Ranch Trail Class – 40% of the total score. Be sure to check the degree of natural cow ability.

Trail Class Horses = Successful trail class horses have the ability to listen and respond to riding cues and are generally quiet-minded and patient. These attributes transfer nicely to the Ranch Trail Class and the Ranch Riding Class which is 40% of the total score and to other VRH skill sets. Be sure to check the degree of natural cow ability.

Speed Event Horses = Successful speed event horses, such as track racing or barrel horses, are bred and trained for speed and frequently do not have the emotional control necessary for VRH.

English Discipline Horses = There is very little difference in good Western or English skills - which are easily transferable. A good mind, good conformation, good basic skills and responsiveness along with the amount of natural cow ability will impact whether the horse would be suitable for the VRH event.

Outside Trail Horses = Riders who have horses which are not trained for a specific event, are used to ride outside around the neighborhood or on park trails, and are considering VRH need to make an objective assessment of their horse's mind and

conformation. The horse needs to meet the minimum behavioral and skill standards listed earlier. Good outside trail horses that accept a variety of situations and obstacles may exhibit the willing attitude so important to this event.

Ranch Horses = Horses that are successful in doing “real ranch work” are good candidates for this event. **Note the word “*successful*”.** These horses have been exposed to a variety of types of work at all gaits in different weather conditions, and have learned patience and a work ethic. These horses have long-trotted for miles, worked cattle, roped, dragged, opened gates, waited patiently until a job is done, and know how to partner with their rider. They frequently need to be “prettied-up” – meaning putting a polish on their skills that meet competition standards. However, don’t be fooled by those advertised as ranch horses that have *not* “been there. . . done that”.

Note: If you are going to show your VRH horse in a breed association competition now – or later as your skills increase – make sure the horse is registered with that association. Ask to see the original registration papers.

In addition to assessing the suitability of the horse’s mind, conformation, and skills, other standard horse-buying aspects need to be considered:

- ✓ Is the horse respectful with good ground manners? How does this horse behave when being shod? With the veterinarian?
- ✓ Does the horse have any of the following vices: bucking, rearing, pulling back when tied, biting, kicking, or cribbing? Are you qualified to handle any of these problems?
- ✓ Has this horse been lame? Had colic? Had any other physical or chronic problem?
- ✓ Does the horse load into the trailer, travel quietly, and unload safely?

Visit the horse in person and watch the seller catch, groom, saddle, and ride the horse. If you feel the horse is safe to ride and matches your riding level, ride first in a controlled area – a round pen or enclosed arena. Don’t allow yourself to feel pressured or rushed to make a decision. The decision will probably take more than one visit. Take the time you need to determine if this horse is right for you and for this event. Bring along a trainer or experienced rider if you feel you would like a second set of eyes. But remember that the decision needs to be yours. At the end of the day, the trainer or other rider will go home, and you need to feel comfortable and safe.

If this horse meets most of your needs – and you can accommodate any of the missing needs – then make arrangements to have a pre-purchase veterinary examination performed.

The “vet check” is a physical examination of a horse by a licensed large-animal veterinarian. It is performed *before* you make the final decision to buy a horse, and gives you information about the physical condition of the horse on that day. The information will assist you in making an informed buying decision knowing what physical limitations you might be buying, what special care the horse might need, and how much any special care might cost.

A basic exam should include the medical history and current physical examination. The horse will be examined for external appearance, conformation, respiration, cardio-vascular system, sensory (including eyes), gastro-intestinal system, external genitalia, musculo-skeletal system, neurological system, and any vices affecting health.

Blood tests and x-rays can be requested at an additional cost. Since VRH includes both low and high impact activities, you probably want X-rays of the front legs and feet and the back hocks. The veterinarian might suggest other x-rays or testing.

A health certificate and coggins test might be required at boarding facilities, organized activities, and when transporting an out-of-state horse. These can be incorporated into the vet check.

The vet will ask you how you are going to use the horse (intended use). For the vet check to have value, a complete answer must be given. How the vet will exam the horse will depend upon how you will be using the horse.

Veterinarians would like you to know that there are no perfect horses. Don't be surprised if some blemish or incorrectness shows up. Consider the blemish or incorrectness in the context of what you will be using the horse for. Some imperfections may not impact your horse's serviceability or performance. Others will.

Lastly, don't over-horse yourself. I have seen some rookie riders buy a high-powered, hair-trigger horse. The first time the horse makes a big move, the rider gets scared – or worse – ends up on the horse's neck or on the ground. Get a mature-minded horse with enough experience that you feel comfortable and confident riding. Then, saddle up and come join the fun.