

# **Soundness in the Horse**

*A Guide for Buyer and Seller*

**Peter Gray, M.V.B., M.R.C.V.S.**

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To Karen  
Whose Gifts Make Birds Sing  
To Peg and Nan  
Lately Gone  
And to My Family  
Just For Being There

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# SOUNDNESS IN THE HORSE

Most people involved in the equestrian world at any level buy or sell a horse at some time and almost every transaction will involve the acquisition of a veterinary certificate of soundness. Until now, there has been no manual dealing with soundness and even in professional literature the subject has received only scant attention.

Horse-owners, whether they be buyers or sellers, will welcome this book because Peter Gray not only explains the mechanical aspects of equine soundness in great detail accompanied with profuse anatomical drawings but also deals with the general health of the horse and the complexities of conformation, movement, vice, temperament and suitability.

Advice is given on the presentation of animals for veterinary examination both for sale or in competitions such as eventing and endurance rides. The process of purchase, whether from private vendor or sale-ring, is explained, as are conditions of sale, trials, legal pitfalls, warranties and declarations.

For the veterinary surgeon or student there is a wealth of information based on the experiences of one who has been vetting horses for more than two decades. The value of this is not simply in the clinical material but also in the side-issues which make soundness examination such a controversial issue.

Everyone, from the person selling on an outgrown pony, to the professional owner buying a million-pound racehorse will learn a great deal from **SOUNDNESS IN THE HORSE**.

Price £18.95

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# Author's Note

This book describes how a horse is vetted for soundness by a veterinary surgeon. Each stage of the examination is described, chapter-by-chapter, with appropriate diversions into other aspects of the horse's anatomy, wellbeing and management.

I have used the male gender throughout when referring to the veterinary surgeon. This is for convenience only and no offence to my female colleagues is intended.

# Introduction

The amount of written material on soundness is, for a subject as old as veterinary medicine, extremely scant. The only extensive work published in recent years has been *The Examination of Animals for Soundness* which was written by R. H. Smythe, MRCVS, and published in 1959. Smythe was a man who had spent his life in practice. He was a prolific writer and a distinguished external examiner in anatomy at The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

The inspiration for *Soundness in the Horse* came from an earlier work, *Modern Practical Farriery*, written by W. J. Miles, MRCVSL, and published in 1868. Miles dealt with the subject of soundness in some depth and much of the information in his book is still relevant today.

However, today we are not encouraged to think of any horse as being 'sound' in the traditional sense. Yet the word is still in everyday use in the equine world and it is not likely to leave our vocabulary, nor should it.

The dictionary definition of 'sound' is, according to Chambers, *uninjured; unimpaired; healthy; wholesome*. People buying or selling horses have no doubt what the word means and use it fearlessly. But lawyers and veterinary surgeons are only too aware that soundness, as an ideal clinical state, is exceptionally difficult to prove and seek to avoid the term. Nevertheless, the description appears in the catalogues of most horse sales today, both in Europe and the USA.

In this book, the term is used in its traditional sense, without disrespect, or apology, to anyone. It is used to signify the health status of a horse and the prospect that it will be able to fulfil the purpose for which it is being bought. For example, a horse purchased as a sound hunter must be able to hunt, with no evident barrier to its natural lifespan as a hunter. Any vendor who declares an animal 'sound for hunting' is liable for this to be so. If it proves not to be, the horse can be returned and there could be a case for damages in some defined situations.

The subject of soundness is of interest to anyone who has ever owned a horse, or who ever intends owning one. In this, there is little difference between the professional breeder/owner selling a million-pound racehorse and a private individual parting with a thirty-year-old pony. The purpose of sale may be simply to dispose of an unwanted animal, but it may just as easily be a commercial exercise with the sole objective of making profit.

For the veterinary surgeon, the duty of soundness examination is always onerous, and one of the most challenging responsibilities of the job. Even for the expert, with the experience of many years, the task is one about which it is never possible to become complacent. The next horse examined could always be a first error, the animal that proves - as horses invariably do - that all humans are fallible. It is a thought that concerns professionals

in this sphere constantly, for there is always the threat of legal action against the individual who makes a mistake, and that is something no one can afford to forget.

The practice of soundness examination is an acquired speciality, for which conventional veterinary teaching is only a starting point. Soundness is a concept which involves many different specialist fields of veterinary medicine, from lameness to cardiology, respiratory disease to ophthalmology. But to say it is a concept is not to give it a mysticism, rather to declare that it is a discipline that involves every aspect of the horse from health to illness.

It is not uncommon to be presented with a horse and get an instant feeling that it is unsound, without knowing why. Inevitably, this suggests instinct, which is quite possibly the case. However, it would be wrong to imagine that such an instinct is naturally acquired, or comes without experience. Its acquisition is based on learning and experience, it necessarily takes time to acquire.

None of this is to suggest, of course, that a preliminary opinion is likely to affect the whole examination or the outcome, nor should it. Every horse is entitled to the benefit of the doubt - though this viewpoint will not please insurers and lawyers! It was R. H. Smythe who said '... it is as culpable to turn down a sound horse as to pass an unsound one'. In other words, it must not be rejected for any fault other than the possession of some basic defect that limits its future usefulness. It cannot be a whim, nor can it be something outside the animal's ambit. During an examination I once watched a gelding being bombarded by a swarm of bees. The animal was being lunged and was sweating, which may have been the attraction. Although the horse did not keep his temper, he was not rejected on account of losing it.

**In any vetting it is possible that**

blemishes of one kind or another will be unearthed. There may be mild respiratory disease, a lump on a bone, even a lesion on an eye. All of these things have to be detected and considered in the final decision. However, the mere presence of an unsoundness does not have to mean the end of the procedure, providing that particular problem is not going to limit the animal's usefulness, and is acceptable to the buyer. Of course its presence may have a bearing on price, but it is important to the outcome that all relevant facts be placed on the table. In this way, it is possible to be fair to both buyer and vendor, and, not least, to the horse.

Soundness examinations today are different from those of a few years ago, where the presence of a defined unsoundness - such as spavin, roaring, etc. - was enough to condemn an animal outright. The situation was cut and dried; the horse either passed or failed. This, however, led to such anomalies as 'has spavin but is otherwise sound'. Naturally, this was open to criticism and an unsatisfactory state of affairs. A horse could have had a bad heart and be otherwise sound, i.e. sound, except likely to drop dead!

Today the final interpretation is more broadly based, the decision reached is open to consultation with the buyer, negotiation with the seller, and, often, second opinion. The procedure, too, has taken on a new - though not totally different - face. It is defined in phases, with a set pattern to every stage. The form and wording of certificates have been standardised, especially in Britain. The old certificate - 'sound in eye, heart, wind and limb' - has gone, being replaced by a style that describes the defects found and expresses an opinion on the horse's suitability for the purpose for which it is being bought. Conditions which were formerly defined as unsound would not now preclude a sale as long as the buyer's intended use was not affected and the horse had a normal

life expectancy. In the USA, on the other hand, vets are advised to avoid commenting on the future use of a horse, simply to record any abnormality found on their certificate.

The tenor of the negotiation will differ depending on whether the purchase is made privately at home or in the yard of a public sales company. The principle difference is that a private sale is conducted with little pressure on time, whereas, in a sale yard, time, to quote from conditions of sale, 'is of the essence'. Everything tends to happen in the few moments a horse walks round the ring before the auctioneer. Heart-rates increase, mouths go dry, catalogues flicker in anxious anticipation.

People often buy in these circumstances without realising there are conditions of sale, without seeing evident blemishes which are clear in daylight, and without having read descriptions or warranties declared in the catalogue. They may be landed with an animal they do not want and which is not returnable under the conditions of that particular sale.

Many horses are taken to such places to be disposed of, maybe because of unsuitability or unsoundness, very often without guarantee or warranty, and a buyer has to act sharply and with the quick-wit of experience in order to avoid serious error. It only takes the flicker of an eyelid to buy, but it could take a long time to undo the trauma if the animal in question is flawed.

Even where post sale examination is allowed, that too is usually time-limited. If it is not possible to conduct this at the sale yard, there may be less than 48 hours in which to get the horse home, arrange for a vet, and report back to the sales company if it is to be returned. Many people do not start to suspect trouble in this time and may lose their chance altogether. Sometimes problems do not become evident for several days anyway, making for a very tight-scheduled operation.

In a private sale, on the other hand, there is seldom any rush, a trial may be given, and the possibility exists of taking more than one opinion on conformation and use (which may well be outside the ambit of veterinary examination). The negative side of this, of course, is that the price is dictated by the vendor and not by market forces.

Most private sales are conducted on the basis of *caveat emptor*, or buyer beware, which means that you buy at your own risk and with full responsibility for your judgements and decisions. Your protection is the contract you make with the vendor, the warranties on offer, and the opinion of the vet.

In public sales there is some protection provided by consumer laws. But if the particular sale is a dispersal ground for crocks and rejects, anyone buying will have a searching task dividing the wheat from the chaff. There may be horses on view with pedigrees that cost vast sums to create, but their ignominious fall to such a lowly market may have been due to some serious defect. Just occasionally, however, a wonderful bargain is picked up and this is the stuff of dreams.

Vendors are individuals who are simply selling horses; they may be street-wise or innocent. Their aim will be to present and sell their animals for the best price the market will allow. They are restricted by law and conditions of sale from making false claims, issuing incorrect descriptions and offering warranties which will not hold up.

It is the vendor's responsibility to declare vices, failing which a horse can be returned at virtually all public sales, and many private ones too. The vet is not obliged to become involved in this; modern veterinary certificates advise that this is a matter between those involved in the sale.

It should be understood, however, that some horses exhibit mild vices at times of

stress, and can be returned because of them. They may not affect the animal's usefulness, and frequently only last until it has settled into its new home. Nevertheless, buyers have the right to return such animals, and frequently do; many people not being prepared to accept a horse with a vice under any circumstances.

Some sales companies stipulate pre-sale vetting as a condition when selling young and unbroken horses. This involves full examination for soundness of horses before they ever get to the sale. Its purpose is to eliminate those which are not sound before they enter the ring, or, if they are unsound, to ensure that this fact be known. It is a practice which makes eminent sense and it is to be hoped that no external pressures (mainly legal) will cause it to end.

Examination now is of a more defined nature, confined to the systems and organs which are readily accessible – basically eye, heart, wind, limb and all surfaces of the body. The examination only applies to the condition of the animal at the time it is carried out. All findings are recorded on the certificate.

The question of drugs arises too. A lame horse could easily have been given a drug to make it sound on the day of sale, and this would hardly be declared, or detected. Although blood samples are usually taken if there is suspicion, very

often the word of the vendor is requested, or written, and the honesty of the individual relied upon. It is a practice which is open to error.

As far as special procedures are concerned, these are generally carried out at the request of the buyer, or on the suggestion of the vet. They require the permission of the vendor. These tests may vary from radiography of joints and bones to endoscopy of the respiratory system, or scanning of internal and external organs for conditions as diverse as reproductive health in the mare or tendon injuries in competing horses. The implications for these will be discussed later (see Chapter 13).

The task, as already stated, is an onerous one, demanding not only experience and maturity on the part of the vet but also the ability to see through dishonesty and trickery and present a wholly objective opinion in the end which does justice to buyer, vendor and horse.

Veterinary examination for soundness is an essential aspect of virtually all horse sales now. Its importance is in fact growing as animals become more valuable and more people become horse owners. Its contribution to the whole horse industry should never be underestimated. Every buyer, in fact, either amateur or expert, can benefit from the information it provides.

# Conclusion

It will be readily appreciated from all the foregoing that the purchase of horses is filled with pitfalls, particularly for the amateur. The fact that even professionals rely so heavily on veterinary examination is proof of the value of the procedure adopted. The world's leading horsemen, be they riders, trainers or breeders will virtually all seek a vet's opinion when they buy.

The value of this opinion is not only the volume of knowledge and experience gained by vets throughout the years, but it is also the proven success of the procedure, which has created demand for itself universally.

As more and more people become interested in the horse, for leisure and sporting purposes, this service will continue to grow in importance.

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    two-year-olds

Peter Gray MVB MRCVS was born in Dublin in 1941. His father, a staff officer in the Irish Army, was a man whose strong farming background crossed many generations and whose genetic ties with the land were evidently passed on to his youngest son.

The author entered University College Dublin in 1958 and began his clinical career in 1964 in a large mixed practice in North Devon. In 1967 he started practice in Fermoy, County Cork, a major growth area in the world of Thoroughbred breeding. Clients, in the main, were professional horsemen, making their living from horses.

From this scene, he was taken into the international sales circuit, acting on behalf of buyers not only in Dublin but at most major British sales. He also vetted for leading trainers and agents buying in Ireland and for individuals buying three-day-eventers and show-jumpers.

In 1972 he led the clinical attack in the first European outbreak of equine virus abortion accompanied by paralysis. This particular outbreak remains one of the worst of its type to this day, yet losses were minimal. The manner in which the problem was tackled laid the basis for the way such outbreaks are approached even today. It was subsequent to this that the code of practice now used for this disease was instigated.

For several years in the mid seventies he ran a foaling station under contract to one of the larger studs in Ireland. He also developed an active interest in physiotherapy as a form of treatment for lame horses, as well as the clinical diagnosis and control of virus diseases in racing and competing horses, a field that is still poorly charted in veterinary literature.

In 1983 he left Ireland and took out a permit to train under National Hunt rules, then acted as resident vet in one of the larger racing yards in Britain during a virus outbreak in the following Flat season.

In 1987 he moved to Herefordshire, to the small secluded village where he now lives with his wife and their two daughters.

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