

S TIPS

on *Finding*

SLEEPERS

*Your best speed prospect might
be right under your nose.*

By MaryAnna Clemons

SLEEPER, IN TERMS OF HORSEFLESH, MEANS SOMETHING DIFFERENT to almost everyone.

For some riders, it might mean finding a great horse at a cheap price that goes on to win big money. For other riders, finding a sleeper might be as simple as finding a horse that fits their personality and allows them to compete on a local level and have fun while doing so. And for the most experienced riders, finding a sleeper can mean picking or breeding for that special horse that promotes their business and makes them a lot of cash.

1) **Be confident in what you've learned.**

SUGAR MOON EXPRESS, OR "MARTHA," CARRIED TEXAS RESIDENT Lindsay Sears to the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo in 2007. As a 2-year-old, the filly cost just \$3,000 from the Jud Little sale. However, the buyer, Dena Kirkpatrick, had a bit of insider information that wasn't available to just anyone.

Years prior, Dena bought a package deal from a racehorse breeder who was going out of business. All she wanted out of the deal was a full sister to Martha Six Moons. Later, she sold the broodmare to a customer and pointed him in the direction of the stallion Dr Nick Bar. Two years later, the same customer was going through some personal challenges and took the resulting filly to the Jud Little sale.

"No one was bidding on Martha," Dena said. "But I knew her breeding and the luck I'd had with those horses in the past."

Dena picked up the horse and promptly changed her name from Doctor In My Pants to Sugar Moon Express.

"I couldn't bear the thought of coming down the alley hearing Doctor In My Pants, so I paid the \$50 to AQHA to have her name changed," Dena said. The name, she added, is also reminiscent of one of the great ones she had a chance to work with, Chicago Moon Express.



Dena Kirkpatrick knew that Sugar Moon Express is the daughter of a full sister to Martha Six Moons. The mare would later carry Lindsay Sears to the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo.

Knowledge was the key ingredient that separated Dena from the other buyers in attendance at the Jud Little sale: Knowledge in the horse's pedigree and knowledge of the type of horses that fit her and that she has had great success with in the past.

"I look at the pedigree first," Dena said. "And then I look at the eye, the shoulder and the correctness of the way the horse is built, in that order. At my age and with my experience with horses, I know what I like and what I am going to get along with. Just because I loved Martha didn't mean anyone else would."

2) Invest in a young horse with a stellar pedigree.

WHITEHORSESCANTJUMP WON LYNDEE Stairs of Hanford, California, more than \$200,000 and took her to the Dodge National Finals Circuit twice where she was in the top five both times. She helped Lyndee qualify for multiple circuit finals, and together they earned rookie of the year and a championship in their circuit. Nationally, they earned rookie of the year in the Women's Professional Rodeo Association.

Lyndee has been training barrel horses for more than 19 years and will overlook some conformation faults for a good pedigree. During her tenure as a clinician, trainer and futurity competitor, Lyndee realized that sometimes a person is just in the right place at the right time. But knowledge is often what separates the buyer from the tire kicker.

She advises horse buyers or trainers without a lot of money to get together as much as they can afford to spend and buy young. "That's what I've done in the past," Lyndee said of buying



Lyndee Stairs knew the pedigree of Whitehorsescantjump and says prospects are often a good choice.

prospects. "Whitehorsescantjump I bought as a yearling. I based it on her pedigree and that her mother was a full sister to Marilyn Camarillo's WNFR horse. Good horses are just like good men: they have to have good mamas."

In addition, Whitehorsescantjump also had Shawnee Bug in her pedigree. Knowing that the Shawnee Bug line had made a lot of NFR barrel horses, Lyndee laid out a mere \$1,500 for the filly.

Lyndee said if you have \$4,000 to spend, instead of going out and buying someone's washed-up or problem horse, invest that money in a younger horse or a 3-year-old. As time goes on, you'll be able to afford to send the horse for training.

If you are a novice or the horse is for a youth, it is imperative to find a trainer who can guide you in the horse buying process and to buy an older, trustworthy "been there, done that" horse, she said.

All of Lyndee's knowledge, likes and dislikes came together to deceive her with a horse named Little Dan Do It. A customer brought Lyndee a 16-hand 3-year-old to ride.

"Had I been looking I probably never would have bought him due to his size," Lyndee said, explaining that she normally rides horses about 14.3. "His father is a four-time AQHA champion in barrels and poles and sired money earning performers of more than \$124,000: Rene Dan Jet by Jet Of Honor. I paid \$5,000 for him."

While the horse wasn't what Lyndee normally considers for her barn, she was open to the horse because he rode well and he had a stellar pedigree.

"Some things are just meant to be," Lyndee said.



Lyndee Stairs paid \$5,000 for Little Dan Do It because of his pedigree.

3) Overlook minor conformation faults.

LANCE GRAVES IS A TWO-TIME AQHA WORLD CHAMPION, Palomino Horse Breeders of America world champion and All-American Quarter Horse Congress champion barrel racer. Lance's father, an accountant, moved his children to the country and bought a pony when Lance was just 3 years old. By 7, Lance won the finals at Fort Smith on a horse that set his father back a whopping \$170.

For the most part, Graves does what the other trainers do in finding a horse: He stays pedigree-specific and buys young. But, he said, he won't pass up a horse for being less than perfect in conformation or having a little white around the eyes.

"If a horse is not straight, it doesn't bother me," Lance said. "I always heard as a child that you can't have white around the eyes and you shouldn't own a blue-eyed dog."

Today, Lance has ridden plenty of horses with white around their eyes, and his best dog has blue eyes. Graves has found that the Bugs Alive horses have a lot of white around their eyes, and it doesn't bother him a bit. He does admit, however, that he will ride a horse that acts silly or fractious that many other people won't bother with, and that willingness has been another aspect of his success.

"I work around it," Lance said. "I do try to be pedigree-specific, but little things don't turn me off. I will ride a horse that is turned out or over at the knee – I accept the way God made that animal, if the pedigree and inner desire match up."

One reason that Lance is able to look past minor conformation faults is that he also has a few hitches in his giddy-up. At 11, Graves was severely injured and now "walks kind of funny" due to it.

"When it's time for me to do my job, I dig in and get it done," Graves said. "A horse can work around a natural handicap, as they don't know they are (conformationally deficient.)"

One such horse that everyone else had passed up had a wing out or club foot and Lance won about \$50-60,000 on



Lance Graves is willing to overlook minor conformation faults for a winning run.

TONYA RATLIFF-GARRISON

her. Many trainers would have tried to shoe the fault out of her, but Lance kept her just as she was.

"She was by Bugs Alive and looked like she was churning butter," Lance said. "We shod her the way she was made, and she never went lame. It's all about the athlete."

4) Take over someone's bad fit.

DENA MILNER IS AN EQUINE MARKETING SPECIALIST AND A BARREL HORSE TRAINER.

She raised FM Radio, Lions Share Of Fame and Muddi Gras, who have earned more than \$60,000 combined for their new owners in barrel races since December. Dena no longer hauls competitively and says her passion is training horses from her New Mexico home for others to excel on. Some of her marketing clients include the Four Sixes, Heritage Place, Carol Rose Quarter Horses and Haythorn Land and Cattle Company.

Dena has a novel approach to finding sleepers: Take over a horse that is a bad fit for someone else. In fact, short of stalking, she suggests that you eyeball horse and rider combinations during a period of time at different races to get a feel for the horse.

If a horse and rider simply don't fit because maybe the rider needs a push type horse and she has a free runner (and free runners fit you to a T), it might be a chance for you to go and talk to that owner and suggest buying the horse, which could be a solution to her problems as well.

"One of the main things that I find is that not every horse fits every rider," Milner said. "And a sleeper, to me, and it's different for everyone, is finding a horse that someone else has and for some reason that combination doesn't work. You have to work as a team, and you have to be compatible, with a lot of communication. A horse and rider combo may not be immediate. You can go to a show and watch a nervous rider struggling with a horse that needs a quiet rider or a rider with a big horse that really needs a smaller horse. A novice horse



Dena Milner advises watching other riders for horses that don't fit them but might fit you.

LONE WOLF PHOTOGRAPHY

with a novice rider is a tough combination to make work, the horse is learning and so is the rider.”

And that, Dena says, is your opportunity to get a horse that may fit your riding style. Which, if it works right, will allow

JOURNAL PHOTO



Fols Dear John placed 10th at the AQHA World Championship Show in tie-down roping in 2000 with Jason Stewart aboard. He also has competed at the World Show in team penning.

you to go on and make a winner out of that horse, or at the very least get more from that horse than the current rider.

Some owners are vested in making it work with the horse they have and might not welcome your advances, but others, Dena said, are glad to see that someone is interested in their horse and they do want to sell and go on to find something that is a better fit for them. Dena calls it a win-win situation.

Another type of rider/horse combo that rarely works is the person working full-time who buys a horse that needs a full-time rider or a lot of training.

“As a horse owner, you have to take into consideration your lifestyle,” Dena said. “That means that a young horse that needs miles and miles and miles can’t just sit in a pen.”

Another mistake that Dena sees riders making is that the rider wants to get into a different “type” of horse, say a racing bred horse vs. a cow-bred horse, and many times that rider doesn’t understand the difference in mentality between the two. The stride is different, the time to mature is different, and the time needed to really get a horse broke. If a rider works a job, has a family and lives in the middle of a city with two acres, it’s probably not a good fit to get anything less than an older, been there-done that horse.

“That’s a hard thing to realize,” Dena said. “People often see the big goal, but they don’t see the small steps it takes to get from point A to point B and the struggles it takes to get them there. The main thing I tell clients is that there is always something to learn from every horse you ride, every person you meet and every situation you find yourself in.”

5) Look in other disciplines for your horse.

MARLENE MCRAE OF RAMAH, COLORADO, IS A WORLD CHAMPION barrel racer, a two-time Olympic gold medal winner, a four-time reserve world champion barrel racer, a five-time Calgary Stampede champion and has qualified for the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo at least 10 times. As a trainer, she has ridden more than 200 horses to a winning career. Anyone who has ever talked with Marlene for a moment or two knows that she doesn’t cut corners and she doesn’t mince words.

“Every horse that I’ve won \$100,000 or more on has come from the working cow pen,” McRae said. “I don’t really have favorite bloodlines. I don’t care. If they are athletes with conformation, I don’t care how they are bred.”

McRae allows that bloodlines do give her a bit of an idea of a horse’s personality before riding. For example, she said, she has had good success with Doc O’Lena and Doc’s Hickory horses, “but there are too many different bloodlines to be able to say specifically. I don’t want to be close-minded and create that close-mindedness in others.”

While bloodlines do matter heavily in futurity horses, rodeo horses are a lot like rodeo athletes: Results are what matters most. She has taken from the roping pens, cutting pens, working cow horse pens, reining pens, off the ranch – you name it, she’ll get a good prospect that is already well broke from other disciplines and turn them into winning barrel racing horses.

“In rodeo, it comes down to conformation for longevity,” McRae said. “It matters how tough they are and if they have a good mental disposition. The bottom line is, can they play the game!”

DENVER STOCK SHOW



Marlene McRae has been successful running barrels on Fols Dear John.

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