

# Boost Your Auction Savvy

*We take you to a mountain horse competition and sale, and give you pointers on buying a horse at auction.*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHAWN HAMILTON

If you're considering heading to a horse sale for your next trail horse, you need to be prepared, know what you're looking for, and observe with savvy.

I recently attended the Wild Deuce Working Mountain Horse Competition and Select Sale, just north of Kingman, Alberta. There, I spoke with a wide range of trail gurus — including outfitters, trainers, buyers, and sellers — on what a prospective buyer should look for at a horse sale and how to judge each horse for trail-worthiness.

Here, I'll tell you what I found out. I'll also give you information on this year's sale (page 18), share one buyer's post-sale comments (page 16), and give you private-party shopping pointers (page 20).

## Top Qualities

First, look for a trail horse with a level head. "The brain is No. 1; it's ultimately a horse's mind that will get you down the side of a mountain safely," says Brenda Murdock, who owns Wild Deuce Retreats & Outfitting with Terri and Chuck McKinney. (For more on the facility, see "Wild Ride at Wild Deuce," April '10.) Brenda Murdock and Terri McKinney are also the facility's guides and outfitters.

Chuck's cousin, Ken McKinney, a horse breeder and trainer, looks for build and conformation. "I look for a horse that's



well put together and balanced, with good muscle," he notes. "But ultimately, I look for calmness — the horse has to be willing to do what you want him to do."

Also, look for suitability for your particular needs. For instance, if you plan on spending long days in the backcountry, look for an easy keeper that will keep on weight in varied grazing conditions.

At the Wild Deuce Working Mountain Horse Competition and Select Sale, the sale horses navigate a 17-obstacle course in 10 minutes. Tests include galloping around the field while the rider sports an oversized slicker.

Terri looks for a kind eye, good bone structure, a strong build, and good-sized, durable feet. She also recommends a minimum age of 4, so "the brain and body are ready for the work."

Karen Anderson, a horse trainer and the sale's announcer, suggests that you look for a thinking horse. "This will make the difference between being safe and getting hurt," she says. "Your horse has to be able to get out of a situation in a safe manner."

## Evaluation Key

At the annual Wild Deuce sale, potential buyers can arrive Friday night to start evaluating horses for Sunday's auction. On this day, the sale horses perform a fun routine called "wild-steer packing" that involves roping a calf then putting a pack saddle on his back.

On Saturday, the sale horses navigate a 17-obstacle course in 10 minutes. Obstacles include a mock horse camp with a running chainsaw, jumping a log, backing

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The Wild Deuce sale is jam-packed with events. *Top:* A sale horse stays tractable during the tarp test. *Right:* A judge evaluates a sale horse during the trailer-loading test. *Lower left:* Buyers check out the sale-horses board. *Lower right:* A sale horse lowers his head for bridling.



## Boost Your Auction Savvy

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uphill, and riding through a plastic tent that's flapping in the wind.

Other tests include riding double, dragging a log to the mock camp, carrying a water jug, and galloping around the field while the rider sports a flapping, oversized slicker.

The Wild Deuce horses in the sale have been ridden in the mountains the previous backcountry season and tolerate just about everything.

"We try to reenact many of the situations that regularly occur in the backcountry," says Chuck. "For instance, the water-jug obstacle was inspired by how we bring water from the river to camp. An advanced horse isn't bothered by the jug swinging between his legs."

I asked one course judge, John Pouliot, what he looked for as a horse completed the course. "Fluidity and free-flowing movement through each of the elements, and

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During the competition, sale horses must jump over a log (above) and ground-tie (right).



Tests include carrying a water jug (left) and going through a mock horse camp (right). At the end of the tests, five minutes are allowed to show off extra skills (below).



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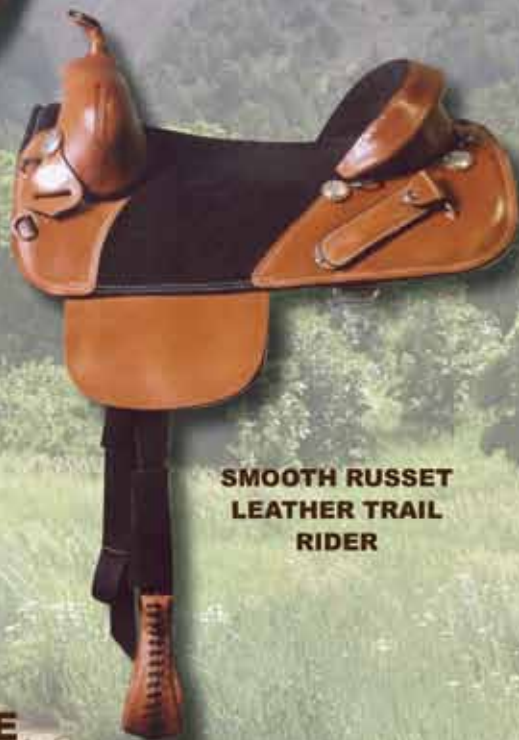
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how the horse responds to new situations,” he says. “You don’t want a horse that approaches strange obstacles like he’s a robot, but one that looks at new challenges cautiously, then puts his trust in the rider to move through or past it.”

“Watch the horses go through every one of the obstacles, observing how they react to each individual situation,” suggests Terri. “This will give you a good idea of how the horses were trained.”

For instance, she notes, watch for attentiveness, patience, and fine-tuning through the gate-opening element. Watch how close each horse gets to the running chainsaw and how relaxed he is as he goes by; this reveals his trust in the rider.

When backing uphill, is the horse’s head down and his mouth soft? Does he look at things, think about them, then walk on calmly, without bolting?

“Dragging the log backward up the hill is an important feature, as most horses are nervous of anything behind them in their blind spot,” says Murdock. During

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Competition judges at work. Judge John Pouliot looks for “fluidity and free-flowing movement through each of the elements, and how the horse responds to new situations. You want a horse that looks at new challenges cautiously, then puts his trust in the rider to move through or past it.”

## Post-Sale Comments

Gary and Terri Donald, from Pincher Creek, British Columbia, were one of the first buyers at the Wild Deuce Working Mountain Horse Competition and Select Sale. Here are their comments several months post-purchase.



The true test: How the horse does once you get him home. Here are comments from buyers Gary and Terri Donald, several months post-purchase.

As you recall, Stella was the first horse in the sale, and we paid \$2,000 for her. She was a 4-year-old buckskin Quarter Horse, standing about 15.1 hands high.

We’ve been very happy with her as an all-around mountain/pleasure-type horse. She’s an easy-keeper, and her feet are great.

We live on the side of a mountain backing on to wilderness, so we’ve been able to put a lot of [miles] on her in pretty rough terrain. She’s done very well.

I believe the work the Deuces did with Stella has made her the bomb-proof reliable mount she is. The ground work the Deuces did with Stella sure paid off in terms of her reactions to new situations.

The first day, we rode Stella in the arena. We found she takes it all in stride and doesn’t get rattled at anything. There’s a lot of commotion during roping practices, but never

once did she seem concerned about all the activity.

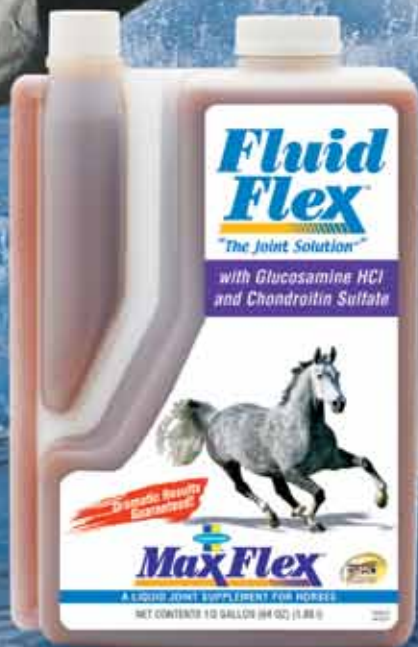
At the time we bought her, we’d been searching for a steady, quiet horse for friends and guests. We’ve found that Stella nicely fits that requirement.

In terms of the sale, we were really impressed. First, the presale advertising was really good — we found the horses to be represented accurately in the literature.

At the sale, being able to watch the horses go through the obstacle course, having the opportunity to ride them prior to the sale, and seeing the vet-check papers reduces the potential for unpleasant surprises after you get the animal home.

We’ve been to a lot of horse sales over the years. I’d say the Wild Deuce event ranks up there with the very best of them. It may sound like a cliché, but you really can buy with confidence at this sale.

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If you're interested in a horse, talk to his owners, say the Wild Deuce outfitters and wranglers. Find out as much as you can about the horse's history.



## 2010 Sale Details

The 2010 Wild Deuce Working Mountain Horse Competition and Select Sale will be held Friday, September 24, through Sunday, September 26, in Kingman, Alberta. Approximately 25 horses will be in the sale; all will be available at Sunday's auction. (*Note:* Wild Deuce consignees are by invitation only.)

A team relay race on the Friday night will test and show off the sale horses' trail agility.

To celebrate the 25th anniversary of and raise funds for Alberta's emergency helicopter program (known as STARS; [www.stars.ca](http://www.stars.ca)), the sale will auction off a registered Quarter Horse mare, Topline Dandy, donated by Muddy Acres Farm ([www.muddyacresfarm.com](http://www.muddyacresfarm.com)). She'll have worked with Wild Deuce Outfitters all season, and will come fully equipped with saddle and bridle.

For more information, contact sales manager Lillian Maughan, (780) 963-4993; [competition@wilddeuce.com](mailto:competition@wilddeuce.com) or [outfitting@wilddeuce.com](mailto:outfitting@wilddeuce.com); [www.wilddeuce.com](http://www.wilddeuce.com).

## Boost Your Auction Savvy

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this exercise, watch each horse's reaction as the weight of the back cinch is sucked into his stomach.

Willingness to take on an extra passenger is important in the backcountry, in case a horse or rider becomes injured. During this exercise, watch the horse's ears to see if he's upset or bothered by the extra weight.

Each horse must also demonstrate trailer loading and unloading; a trustful horse will enter and back out calmly.

Once the course is complete, each own-

er has an additional five minutes to show off any extra skills the horse may have. For instance, Terri throws a plastic water jug over a horse's head, allowing the rope to wrap around his neck. She then gallops past the audience holding a tarp over her head as it flaps in the wind behind her.

## Insider Tips

The Wild Deuce outfitters and wranglers also offer these sale suggestions:

- **Get there early.** Arrive Friday so you don't miss anything. Watch how the horses handle everything, all weekend, from morning 'til night. This will give you a good feel for the horse's mind and attitude before making a bid for him.

- **Observe the daily routines.**

Observe the horses at the trailers as they're tacked up and fed. Do they stand quiet at the trailer? How do they react when other horses walk past them?

- **Look at the health records.**

Look at each horse's veterinary checks. (One is available for each sale horse.)

- **Talk to the owners.** If you're interested in a horse, talk to his owners. Find out as much as you can about the horse's history.



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## Private-Party Shopping Pointers

Shopping for a horse from private parties? Terri McKinney of Wild Deuce Retreats & Outfitting offers these pointers.

- **Get there early.** If you arrive early, you can gain valuable insight into the horse's temperament. How easy is the horse to catch? How are his manners?
- **Observe ground work.** Watch the horse as he's being handled. Is he calm and patient?  
Does he stand quietly to be groomed, or does he paw? An impatient, pawing horse that would rather be with his friends in the field will most likely prance on the trails.
- **Tack him up.** Ask the owners if you can tack the horse up yourself. How does he react to being tacked up?
- **Get trail time.** Ride the horse as many times as the owner will allow. Try to find trails the horse hasn't been on before. How he reacts will give you great insight into his character. Ride the horse alone, as well as


with others. Mount and dismount on the trail.

- **Change the scenario.** In a group, try him at the front, in the middle, and at the back of the pack. Ride him away from the others on a separate trail to see how willing he is to leave the rest. This can be very important when in the backcountry. The more scenarios you can run through, the more you'll know what you're getting yourself into.
- **Look inward.** Ask yourself how the horse feels. Is he the right horse for you? Is he well-suited for what you want to do? Your horse has to feel right for you!



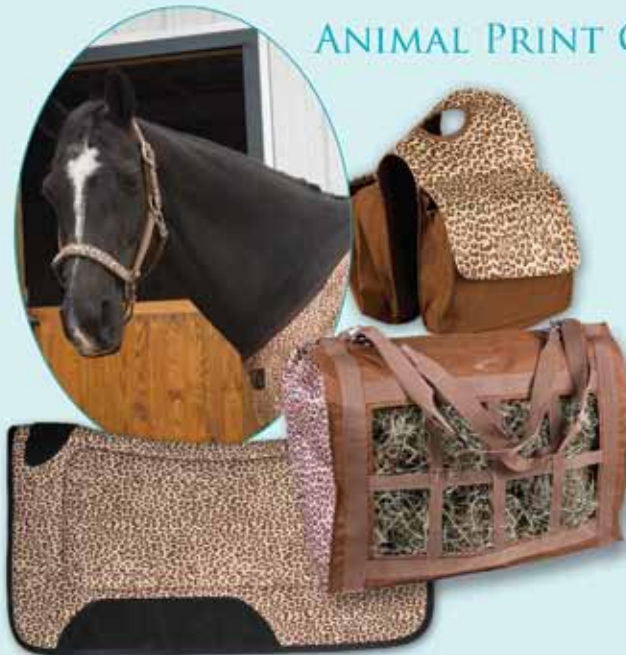
- **Ride the horse.** If you find a horse you like, ride him on Sunday in the warm-up arena, before the sale.
- **Consider the mind.** Don't let looks get in the way of finding a good, safe trail horse. Rather, look for intelligence, which will enable the horse to get you out of a potentially dangerous situation.

Take it from me. I have a gorgeous mare in the barn, but when I trail ride, I always choose my not-so-pretty Appaloosa gelding. I wouldn't give him up for the world.

Safe and happy trails come from buying with savvy.  TTR

As the owner of CLiX Photography ([www.clixphoto.com](http://www.clixphoto.com)), Shawn Hamilton travels worldwide to cover equestrian events and capture images that appear in top magazines, including The Trail Rider. She lives with her husband, four children, and five horses on a farm in Ontario, Canada.

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On the Friday before Sunday's auction, the sale horses perform a fun routine called "wild-steer packing" that involves roping a calf then putting a pack saddle on his back.

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— Laura Aguredakes, A True Believer



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