

Your First Reiner *and* Beyond

BY BRIAN WELMAN, AS TOLD TO WENDY LIND



One of Brian Welman's most successful non pro riders is Nicole Dryden of Anoka, Minnesota. From youth all the way through the non pro classes, Nicole has been a consistent competitor.

When it comes to learning the sport of Reining, the first horse you purchase can make all the difference in the world. That first horse will not only affect how quickly you learn the maneuvers, but also how much fun you have along the way.

As a professional trainer, I've worked with a lot of people venturing into the reining pen for the first time, and that experience has helped me develop criteria I use when selecting a customer's first reining horse. In this article, I'll discuss some of the things I look for in a first reining horse, as well as the appropriate time to move on to the next one.

Initial Rider Assessment

Aspiring reiners come from all types of riding backgrounds, so the first thing I do is assess their riding ability. I put new riders on a couple different horses to see how well they ride and what kind of horses fit them. I have several older, experienced horses in the barn that I use in my assessment. By having them ride a variety of horses, I can learn a lot about their riding skills in a limited amount of time.

Then we sit down and discuss their goals for the show pen. For most new riders, the goal is to spend a year or two in the green-as-grass rookie classes until they learn the maneuvers

and get comfortable showing. Then it's on to the rookie, the limited non pro and so on.

The popular theory is that the best kind of horse for a beginning reiner is a really quiet and dull one. However, that combination actually doesn't work well. After about a week with a green rider, a quiet and dull horse will get to the point that it won't do anything.

It's better to find a horse that's safe, yet has a little bit of "feel" (sensitivity) to it, providing the person can ride reasonably well. With a horse like that, I take off the rider's spurs and let the rider "flop around" on the horse for a week. That numbs a feely horse a little, and before long the horse realizes that the rider isn't going to hurt him or ask him for much. Then the horse backs down and relaxes, but still has enough feel that a beginning rider can get the horse to do the maneuvers. That's a much better situation than a lazy horse that figures out the rider can't make him do anything.

How Much Can You Afford?

The first thing I ask a beginning reiner is how much he or she can afford to spend. I warn them that there's a good chance that they'll lose some or all of that money when they're ready for their next horse. The goal is to buy as much horse as your budget will allow and not worry about the outcome. That gives you the freedom to change as many leads as you need to, stop as many times as it takes to get the hang of it and show as much as possible so you can learn the ropes.

I usually look at horses that have been around the block a few times. However, in any such purchase, I like to think that I can make the horse better and extend its show career by changing up some things in its training. I firmly believe that you can sometimes extend the show career of a horse simply by pairing it with a new rider.

I try to have the rider buy as inexpensive a first horse as possible. If I can find a horse for \$7,500 that will do all the parts, then great. Sometimes they cost more. It's all a matter of being in the right place at the right time. I usually don't even vet (go through a pre-purchase exam) the horse because one that does its job is more important than one that vets perfectly. I prefer to buy horses from people I know and trust. If the horse needs to be maintained because of joint issues or something, I don't have a problem with that.

I've found that the NRHA Futurity is a great place to shop for reining horses of all experience and price levels. Earlier in the week they cost more, but if you wait until the end of the week, you might be able to find a deal. I look for horses that fit the bill for my customers. Geldings seem to work best, and they're usually less expensive. But I have purchased many mares that have worked just fine. Some people prefer buying mares because they feel they can still breed or sell them if they get hurt.

The Right Horse

The goal for a rider's first reiner is to find as much horse as possible that fits within the budget. On a limited budget, some things are more important than others.

A horse that can stop well is very important, especially for beginning riders. I want something that runs down and stops no matter what. I can get by with a mediocre turn, but a stop can't be faked. And for someone just starting out in Reining, a horse that doesn't stop well is going to really affect his or her confidence in a negative way.

Lead changes are also important. I focus on horses that are seven or eight years old. By then it's apparent what kind of lead-changer they are, and how they are in the show pen. Ideally, I look for a horse that can mark a 70.

One thing that I'm willing to live with is a horse that's a little rough at the faster speeds. The reality is that the horse probably isn't ever going to need to do much at upper speeds in the green rookie classes. I would rather have a horse that runs down and drags his butt and turns okay, even if it isn't very smooth at the faster speeds. I can get more done with that than with a horse that can plus one its circles.

Have Faith in the Plan

My advice to green riders is that once they've found a trainer and purchased a horse with his or her help, the next thing to do is to commit to the trainer's program. For example, in my barn, if you practice things without me around telling you if you're doing them right, we're not going to progress. And you're going to wear out your horse without gaining anything. So, if I tell you the first month that all you're going to do is lope circles, that's all I expect you to do. I'll start adding in maneuvers when I feel you're ready.

If you want to learn this new sport, have faith in following the program that your trainer thinks is best for you. You have to develop a base first and then start adding higher degrees of difficulty. Some people are like kids in a candy store. They want to test everything on their horse when the trainer is away, and they do more harm than good. So commit to the trainer you hired and follow his or her program.

Everybody wants to win. You hear people say that they just want to learn and have a good time. But let's face it: Winning is a lot more fun than losing. If you're not going to commit to do what your trainer says you need to do to win, then things are going to get frustrating. Your trainer is going to do his best to find the horse that fits your needs at that point in your learning curve. So have faith in that as well.

Realize that the horse you want and the horse that's best for you at that particular point in time probably aren't the same. More than likely, your first horse isn't going to be the prettiest or the fanciest thing at the show. It's more important that the horse is able to do the maneuvers and allow you to learn and

get better. When you're ready for your second horse, you can look for some of the things you want, such as conformation, pretty looks, color, or size, etc. Your first horse needs to know his job and teach you to ride. If he has stubby ears and a short tail, but he works and is in your price range, consider him your dream horse for the time being.

On to the Next One ...

It depends, but your first horse will probably last you a season or two. For some riders who've ridden quite a bit before, they might show in the green-as-grass a couple times and then be ready for the rookie. At the end of the first season, I sit down with my clients and come up with a plan for the next year. We decide if that first horse will last through another season, or if it's time to trade it in and go shopping for a new one. Often, after a rider and a horse figure each other out, they can sometimes start to annoy one another. Once you and your horse clash like that, it's time to move on to the next one.

When it comes to buying a second horse, price range can be all over the board. I mainly look for one that's capable of marking a little higher than the beginner horse. Think of it like this: If a professional trainer can mark only a 69 or 70 on a horse, it's not very likely that a limited non pro rider is going to be able to mark a 70 on it. So preferably, I want a horse that can mark a 72. Then, when the limited non pro shows it, a 70 or 71 is attainable, and he or she is going to win a check fairly often. Again, if you buy a limited non pro horse, there's a good chance you won't get your entire initial purchase price back. The key is to do well on it and sell it when you're winning. People don't usually line up at the out-gate waiting to buy a horse that just marked a 65. Know when to sell or just enjoy the horse and be willing to take a loss.

A second horse can sometimes last more than one season; it all depends on the horse and how often you show it. If you maintain the horse and keep it in training, it's more likely to last two seasons. But if you show it hard every weekend, it

might not. However, when a seasoned horse goes to a new program or is paired up with a new rider, it's possible to get another season or two out of it.

After a rider has worked his or her way up through the green rookie to the rookie and then through the limited non pro level, I'm a lot more selective when looking for the next horse. Upper-level non pro horses cost more money. But again, it's about being in the right place at the right time. Sometimes a person needs to sell a horse for one reason or another, and it might work out great for my customer. I'm always looking for horses, and when I have a client who's ready to step up, I usually have a pretty good idea about the options out there. You can sometimes find really nice horses and get them bought right. But if you see one that you just have to have, it's probably going to cost more. That's what drives the market. Horses are worth only what people are willing to give for them.

A Bad Combination

One thing I warn new reiners about is the temptation to buy a young horse on the premise that the two of you are going to learn together. I get a lot of calls about this from people just starting out in the reining business, and I say the same thing: It's not the way to do it. I can't teach you what it feels like to do the maneuvers the right way if you don't buy a horse that already knows how to do the parts. And if you don't know how things are supposed to feel, how are you going to teach a young horse that doesn't know anything? That's a bad combination I've never seen work.

Even experienced riders need to ride well-broke reining horses at first to learn how Reining is supposed to feel. The temptation in buying an unbroke horse is that people think it's cheaper. But that really isn't the case. In reality, there's no guarantee that any horse will actually do reining maneuvers well, even after it's trained. So it's cheaper to buy one that's broke and ready to go rather than buy one and train it for a year or two, only to realize that it won't work out anyway. □



About Brian Welman

With over \$265,000 in NRHA earnings, NRHA Professional Brian Welman has competed in NRHA events successfully since 1984. He has numerous major titles to his credit in both ancillary and aged events. In 2006, he won the prestigious open class championships at both the NRHA Derby and NRHA Futurity on Brennas Golden Dunit, as well as the open at the 2006 Tulsa Classic. The trainer also started 2007 off in a winning way by capturing the Scottsdale Arabian Reining Futurity Championship, which earned him a \$25,000 payout.

Brian is also an NRHA Futurity, Derby and NRBC finalist, and recently judged the 2007 NRHA Derby. His non pro clients have established a successful record as well, winning the National Reining Breeders Classic limited non pro, the American Quarter Horse Association novice amateur reining championship twice and reserve championship once in the last three years. Brian, who trains out of Goodwin Stables in Hastings, Minnesota, also has a large clientele of rookie riders who have won numerous awards at both regional and national levels.