

The hunt for a horse begins.

by Emily Flaxman

The entries opened January 6 for this year's Thoroughbred Makeover challenge, sponsored by the Retired Racehorse Project. There are some changes to the way they are handling the applications this time around -- some good, some very nerve-wracking!

Last year you had to apply with your horse and entries were restricted to 350 in total. So it was a bit of a race to the finish post. Sensibly, this year they are accepting trainer applications first and allowing you to register the horse at a later date.

The nerve-wracking part is that, even though they are expanding to 500 competitors this year, they will be taking the top 500 people from however many applications they get. Which means I'll be taking a huge leap of faith if I get my Off-The-Track-Thoroughbred before they announce who gets through, which should be mid-February.

But I guess that adds a little excitement to an otherwise dull winter!

So far I haven't found my OTTB. I've had a couple of false starts, with some promising leads that just weren't meant to be. That can be frustrating, but it's all part of the process.

Because this isn't my first rodeo, so to speak, I have some connections at Golden Gate Fields who let me know if they have anything that is retiring or just not working out as a racehorse.

My main resource on the hunt is CANTER California. The girls there are so helpful and have such a huge network. I try to join their track liaison when she does her Saturday morning swing through so I can meet the trainers and actually look over potential horses.

The horses at GGF are only allowed to train between 6:30-10 a.m. every day because racing is in the afternoons. So the mornings are crazy, but that also means it's the best time to catch the trainers.

Usually for my resale projects I'll look at anything that I think could be suitable, including those that are retiring because of injuries. For the RRP challenge though, because of the tight timeline, my criteria narrows.

I don't care about gender, except that I would need a stallion gelded before bringing him home as my mares are all total flirts. Age isn't super important either, as long as they are at least 4. I just feel it's too intense for something younger than that, especially with the long haul to Kentucky for the competition.

Sound is preferable, of course. A minor injury would be fine but I won't have time to rehab something more serious.

The horse could be too slow, not have the heart to win, or be a graded stakes winner that the owners want to retire at the top.

In some ways it's nice to get a lightly raced horse that is too slow, that way you know they don't have much mileage. On the other hand, if something has won and raced consistently for several years you know that horse is solid as granite.

No Such Thing as "Not My Type"

For the horse itself, I don't really have a "type" that I like. Obviously a nice color and a pretty face are always appreciated but that isn't what I look for first, it's more of a nice bonus.

February 2016 - My Thoroughbred Makeover

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Sometimes you have to have a little imagination to see through what is standing in front of you and picture what it could look like a year down the road.

Some TBs will look like a sporthorse -- just a little thinner -- and others will look like a greyhound that got dragged through a bush backwards.

I look first at the bone structure - is the horse evenly proportioned with a good length of back and strong loins? A neck that comes out of the middle or top of the shoulder (this one can often be deceptive if they have no topline and a well-built underneck). Good angles for the shoulder and for the hindquarters. Clean legs, cold tendons and clean joints with no swellings or puffiness.

I like to run my hands over the whole horse, feeling for sore spots and looking for reactions, just so I have an idea of potential problems.

One thing that doesn't bother me is bad feet, strangely. I trim my own horses and most of my projects have been able to transition to being barefoot. I think there must be something in my water!

As corny as it sounds, I like to see a kind eye. The attitude of the horse says a lot, too. I want to see a horse that is interested in me, happy to be handled, cooperative of coming out of its stall to stand up or be jogged. I tend to ignore a little snarkiness, as that tends to mellow out once they are let-down, but I would walk away from something that seemed outright mean.

The tricky thing about picking a horse straight from the track is that you may get to look them over, and maybe even see them trot up. But that's all you get.

You can't test ride, and generally you won't see them ridden because once the decision is made to retire them the owners don't want to continue to pay track and jockey fees. It's a gamble. But that is why the prices are lower direct from the track than from someone like me who resells: we're taking that risk for you.

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For me, I enjoy taking that chance. I love to see if I can bring out the best in someone else's reject. I'm so excited about this challenge and the mission of the Retired Racehorse Project to get more people involved in OTTBs as hopefully it will allow me to do it with more of these amazing athletes.

I'm going to keep searching and hopefully next month I'll be able to introduce you to my next partner.

Columnist Emily Flaxman uses dressage as a foundation for training OTTBs and other breeds from her base in the East Bay Area's Clayton. She trained Go Wheeler Go to top finishes in her first Thoroughbred Makeover last year (California Riding Magazine, January 2016) and is detailing this year's effort regularly in our pages. To learn more about Emily, visit www.emilyflaxman.com

For more on the Thoroughbred Makeover, visit www.retiredracehorseproject.com