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## the cast of characters

*“What a character” in American English refers to someone who has a funny or quirky personality. In equine lingo, “character” means a horse’s basic personality—the way he thinks or acts. And we sure know there are a lot of different characters out there!*

As life with horses rolls along, we get to meet a variety of horse personalities, and although I doubt I have seen them all, I have a fair idea of the different groupings by now.

Starting with the premise that there is no perfect horse, or human for that matter, we still always look for the ideal match to ourselves, which we then consider the “ultimate” equine. In horses, as in people, usefulness and success depends almost entirely on how the mind works. The fastest racehorse, most talented jumper, and most extravagantly moving dressage horse are all useless if their brains do not support their performance.

## The Lawn Ornaments

The largest group of horses, I believe, consists of the friendly but unmotivated ones. They may or may not have a great aptitude for something, but it hardly matters since they are only happy when they do nothing. Incredibly difficult to motivate, this group avoids being trained by passively resisting the movement of any muscles except those used to chew their feed. Begging and forcing these critters around a dressage arena is usually more painful for the rider than the horse, since the energy crisis is always lurking and "work" is a four-letter word.

Members of this group make lovable pets and pretty lawn ornaments, and they are usually easy keepers. Just pass the grain by the stall. They also sleep well at night and any time of day.

## The Chili Peppers

The polar opposite are the "hot chili pepper" group. Here the excitement starts at dawn's early light, with a vigorous romp around the stall, some weaving, cribbing, and kicking to get the day started, and perhaps a blowup in the cross-ties to demonstrate readiness and lack of patience. Once the rider is up, there will be no waiting for the aids, because a horse of this type is "Triple A," and he can do all the movements from the Grand Prix simultaneously. What he really does not need is interfering input from the saddle. This dude is so into his game, he does not notice his surroundings, the temperature, the end of the arena, or any of the details in life. He just goes, and you'd better enjoy the ride!

Although all this energy is commendable, this workaholic is in many ways just like his human counterpart: He has no time to listen, learn, and wait, and he rarely enjoys the fruit of his labor, because he is too charged up to stop for a lump of sugar. Advantages: The motor is always running, never mind the weather or conditions, and the horse never pouts or gets

sour—he's too wrapped up in his own fast-forward world to even know how to get in touch with his inner self.

## The Prisoner of Instinct

The worriers are the next group. Here the environment is all-important, and it is the enemy! I realize that horses are animals of flight, but a horse of this type carries the instinct to the extreme. He is on high alert twenty-four-seven, and revels in his own paranoia. Just to keep things interesting, trains, fire engines, and helicopters can go by unnoticed, while a rustling leaf or a sunspot in the arena will cause hysterics. There is always tension present to ruin the Training Scale\* and hinder learning. This horse never really allows you to ride him, since he is so challenged by life. A fair degree of talent and energy is not unusual in the mix, but unfortunately most of it is spent jumping sideways and going in all the wrong directions. Only the very patient and somewhat masochistic professional can tolerate this kind of animal, since he can be unpredictable and unsafe to ride and tends to let you down at shows by going into vigilant mode at the expense of concentration.

Note: I know of several horses in this category that went on to international glory with the right rider. But only then does it work.

## The Hypochondriac

The horse that is “imaginary sick” is another difficult animal to live with. He is never really fit to ride because he has a slight physical “hiccup,” which is seldom the same two days in a row. He is a tiny bit stiff behind, a tad sore in front, has a slight cough or a swollen eye, all in succession. As soon as there is an important event coming up, he is unfortunately

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\* *The Training Scale in order of requirements consists of: Rhythm, Suppleness, Contact, Impulsion, Straightness, and Collection.*

indisposed. Just the mention of a horse show makes him hold his breath until he pops a splint. The most irritating thing about this character is that he can be very sound and useful at times when nothing is at stake. I call this type the "excuse horse," and in its extreme form, he becomes suicidal, cutting himself on objects nobody can find, getting repeatedly cast in the same corner, sliding into the gate and pulling all suspensories.

Of all the types of horses, this one is the real heartbreaker, because he always keeps you hoping he'll be fine once you patch him up again.

## The Playboy

And then, of course, there are the breeding stallions. Over the years, I have ridden about a dozen of them in competition. They all thought the world of themselves, were rarely more than 75 percent tuned in to the present, and required constant massaging of their egos. In return, they provided power and presence and sometimes brilliance, and a considerable amount of attitude.

Most horses, like us people, have a strong need to feel secure, and stallions are no exception. An insecure stallion can easily turn into a real turkey in an instant, and then he is a lot more horse to handle than a mare or a gelding. No group of horses can be more awe-inspiring, and yet, as international competitor Lisa Wilcox\* said in her excellent article on riding stallions in *Dressage Today*, there is always "behavior" to be expected when you ride a stallion. I will admit that when you manage to bond with a stallion, it is a very special feeling, and although it has only happened to me a couple of times, I am working on developing a more balanced view on the subject.

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\* *Lisa appeared earlier in Part I (see p. 29).*

## The Ideal

Even the ideal horse will have some of the characteristics I've mentioned here, but none of them will dominate the picture.

He will be energetic, but not tense; careful with his own body and with yours; focused on his rider and willing to learn. He will enjoy showing himself off and never abandon you in a test. If you manage to find and keep but *one* of these in a lifetime, count yourself among a very lucky few!

2004