

By Denise Conroy



American Bashkir Curly Registry

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Article:

You've read all the articles about Curlies, have you? You read things like, *puppy dog temperament, great for beginners, novices and kids*. Maybe you've heard things like "born broke"? Yes, Curly horses are exceptional, but they are still horses. I decided to write this article to dispel myths and share some tips about buying your first Curly and to add some realism to this adventure.

Over the past year or so I have heard stories of some really sad situations involving first-time buyers and green Curlies. Before the breed gets a bad rap and people get hurt, I thought maybe if we educated the buyer a bit, we could create a good situation for both the buyer and the horse. The one thing that we probably have more of than any other breed is beginner/novice buyers. This is partly due to the fact that first-time owners are drawn to that steady temperament, but the other factor is that people who would otherwise never be able to own a horse due to allergies now can fulfill their dream. One allergic buyer said it well: "A childhood dream reawakened with the power of adult determination is a double-edged sword." Such people start with determination but little education. This enthusiasm rushes them into buying without a lot of thought. These buyers haven't had the opportunity own *any* horse, let alone *get close to* or take lessons on one before. This really spells disaster! I thought a page of **suggestions and** resources for new horse buyers would be helpful.

1. **Take a year to invest in an education.** "A year?" you ask. "But I've waited my whole life to own a horse. I can't wait a year! Life is too short. I can learn as I go, can't I?" Not if you want to live your dream, not a nightmare. You may be forgetting that these are 1,000 lb. animals, not dogs. Many people I know take more time to buy their family dog than to buy a horse! Even the sweetest Curly can intimidate the unknowledgeable. Due to the breed's feral heritage, they tend to be very herd-oriented. If you don't understand herd dynamics and behavior, you will never establish your dominance with your horse or earn his respect. This is a very dangerous situation. Here are some basic areas that you will need to focus on *before* you buy your first horse.

A. Basic Care: Farrier, deworming, teeth floating, feed and nutrition, vaccinations, and preventative care. The number-one cause of death in horses is colic. They have extremely sensitive digestions. The tiniest bit of mold or bad hay can kill them. How do you prevent proud flesh, founder, thrush, or rain rot? Learn how to prevent problems through proper feeding schedules, proper fencing, and providing environmental surroundings.

B. Tack and Equipment: You should also have knowledge of tack you will need. What's the difference between a snaffle and a curb bit? If a horse is trained English versus Western, what does that mean? What type of saddle do you buy? You must understand how a saddle should fit so your horse doesn't get sores or pinched by one that's too narrow and bucks you off! What is a narrow tree compared to Semi QH or Full QH tree? Find out!

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C. Basic Training Techniques: Even if you buy a well-trained horse, you still must understand the basics—giving to pressure, approach and retreat methods, desensitizing techniques, disengaging the hindquarters, gaining a horse's respect by establishing your space and boundaries. Learn the way a horse thinks. He is a prey animal, and they don't have good depth perception. Get into their minds so you understand better how to work with them.

D. Learn to Ride: In order to have a happy horse, you must have a certain level of riding ability. Allergic folks will have to find a Curly to take lessons on or take their allergy medicine while they learn on a non-Curly. Videos can help, but they aren't enough. You need to learn to ride a horse like you learned to ride a bike. It takes balance and an independent seat so you aren't pulling on the horse's mouth. You have to learn to relax and go with the movement of the horse. This takes practice and time. Can you imagine what a horse must think when a beginner gets on him and they barely hang onto their backs, lean on their mouths with the reins, give them mixed signals by kicking yet simultaneously pulling back on the reins? What about that unbalanced rider bouncing on the horse's back to the point of making the horse sore? Even a well-trained horse would get frustrated by that, and it won't respect such a person. Then it begins to test him to see what it can get away with.

Videos on items A-C are a great option, especially for allergic folks. You might spend \$500-800 on a library of good videos, but they really help. Also, take the time to visit Curly breeders and owners in your area or out of state. Find out what works for them in training their Curlies or working with them, learn about bloodlines, feeding programs, and more. Make a mental note of which horses you liked best and what their bloodlines are. That makes a difference when it comes to shopping for your dream Curly. If you are not allergic, I would suggest you attend as many clinics as possible, and take private lessons. The best option would be to lease a horse and really learn what horse ownership is about. Pat Parelli says that 80% of new horse owners sell their horses and quit riding within the first year! Those statistics would be reduced greatly if buyers invested their first year in gaining an education, then bought a horse.

2. **Research the Breed:** After you have an education on horses in general, you can now do some research on the Curly breed. Below are some resources for good information on the breed. In my experience I have found most Curlies, no matter what bloodline, give a smooth, enjoyable ride. I have also found them to be versatile no matter what your discipline—trail, Western, English or show. They are truly a wonderful breed and offer great variety. Many breeders have strong opinions concerning what they produce, and rightfully so. Don't let that intimidate you. Every breeder should have a program he or she follows. Look for common goals and seek out those breeders.

About Curly Temperament: It is true that *in general*, the Curly horse is extremely quiet, friendly, people oriented and intelligent! My first Curly was a 3-year-old halter-broke stal-

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lion, 15.2h. After just 30 days of natural horsemanship training, I rode him out on the trail, and he was amazing. I felt safer on him than any horse I had ridden before. But don't assume all Curlies are carbon copies of each other. A lot has to do with genetics and environment. The other attribute about *some* Curlies that not many people talk about is their innate desire to be a one-person horse. In our years of breeding we found this to be true about 50% of the time. Some breeders and owners feel this is one of their best qualities. Curlies also don't forgive as easily, so if you make a mistake or do them an injustice, it will take a while to regain their trust again. This could be one of the problems we see with beginner buyers and Curlies.

A trainer once told me a story that made it clear to me the difference between a QH and a Curly. He said when he was a child, he would go out and ride his QH like a wild kid and end the day with the horse stuck in mud up to its belly. They had to get a truck to pull him out. The next day, they would get up and that horse was ready to go again. He said you could never do that with a Curly. If you did that just once with a Curly, you would probably never be able to catch that horse again. Call it extreme intelligence or lack of forgiveness—either way, Curlies are different and won't be mistreated.

Curlies are also well-known for not being spooky. They would rather plant their feet than turn and run. Yes, we have found this to be true—generally. However, part of that marvelous attribute can lead to one issue that many fail to discuss. Whether people realize it or not, planting the feet is also a form of instinctive behavior. If Curlies are not taught to think properly and are pushed too hard too fast, they tend to use that planting-of-the-feet instinct pretty well. Sometimes they just won't move, but in other cases, they tend to buck instead of bolt. The good news is that if you handle them right, build a relationship out of trust and respect, use natural horsemanship techniques with consistent daily handling, you will have a bond with your Curly you never thought was possible with any horse. When they give you their heart, they give 100%. That is the magic and wonder of this breed.

3. What is your Dream horse? OK, you've got an education. You have at least an advanced beginner's riding ability, and you feel you're up for the challenge of buying your first Curly. The first thing you need to determine is, "What will I use my Curly for?" Trail horse, Show horse (English, Western, or both?), Family, or Youth horse? What level of training and what age? I realize there are very few well-broke beginner-type Curlies available, so if you absolutely have to settle for a fairly green horse, plan to work with a trainer for the first year. For heaven's sake, do not buy a weanling! Yes, they are small, but they have the mind of a baby and will take more skill and patience than a three- or four-year-old. If you're buying a fairly green horse, take into consideration that animal's temperament. If they are the boss in the herd and you are timid, that's not the horse for you. It is always best to pick a horse that gets along in the herd, because that tells you the horse has an easygoing personal-

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ity. He is confident but not a bully.

A strong word of caution: Please don't consider breeding until you have at least five years of horse ownership under your belt. Breeding Curlies should be left to people who not only understand conformation, genetics, and care and handling of a mare and foal, but more importantly, they know how to market and sell horses. Anyone can put a mare and stallion together, but the last thing this breed needs is random, careless, and casual breeding practices. Those who take on the responsibility of breeding Curlies should be ready to invest a fortune to make a little money. I see more new buyers distracted into breeding simply because they buy young colts and don't have the heart to geld them, so they think, "Hey! Why not breed? I can make some money and recoup some costs!" Wrong! In my opinion, if you don't have the education, experience, and the marketing skills to raise and sell foals, leave it to the professionals or get five years under your belt before you do.

4. **Your Experience:** Be realistic about your experience and knowledge of horses. If you have worked with a trainer, ask for an unbiased opinion. You are setting yourself up for disaster if you overstate your ability. Be clear to the seller what your level is and what you want in your first horse. Check the seller's references. If it's a breeder, be sure he takes the time to match rider and horse.

5. **List Priorities in Your Future Curly :** Make a list of qualities you want in your Curly. Start with the most important traits and end with the things you can live without. Color should be the last thing you consider. A great horse is never the wrong color. Also, be mindful that if you are looking for a reliable, rideable Curly, plan to spend a minimum of \$5,000 US. Save ahead of time if need be and wait until you can afford it. Do not settle for a horse that is unsuitable but inexpensive. In the end, you'll end up paying **more** in the long run and cause yourself years of grief. You'll end up being one of the statistics Pat Parelli talks about.

6. **Finding Curlies for sale:** The best resources to shop for Curlies are: <http://equine.com> ; <http://dreamhorse.com> ; <http://abcregistry.org> ; <http://curlyhorseclassifieds.com> ;

7. **Other Resources:** You may also be a bit more resourceful and contact the ABC Registry to buy their stud books. If you've done your homework, you should have a favorite bloodline that interests you. It's fun to dig and find horses that have those bloodlines and contact the owners. There are many awesome Curlies that could be for sale if the right person approached the owner. This happened to me when we were shopping for my daughter's horse. I found Cheyenne in the stud books, loved his bloodlines, and saw he was registered as a gelding, so I knew he was gelded at a young age. I contacted the ABCR for the current owner and wrote her a letter stating my interest in her horse. She told me she had considering selling him and sent me pictures. He was perfect! We flew to Washington state to see him and bought him before she could change her mind. Sometimes the best ones sell long

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before they hit the Internet sales pages. Dig a little deeper and you may find that diamond hiding in someone's backyard.

8. Asking Questions or See a Video: Once you've found a horse you are interested in, be sure to ask as many questions as you can. A good seller shouldn't mind answering them. If you are buying a riding Curly and can't make the trip to see the horse in person, ask for a video. The video should consist of everything from the horse in the pasture/corral with other horses and how they react to being caught, handled, longed, tacked up, ridden and anything else they claim the horse can do (within reason). I would strongly recommend, if you are buying a horse that you want to become your lifelong buddy, you spend the money to see the horse in person. You will want to know that you connect with that horse. Once you have owned horses for a while, you can make judgments a bit better and may find video and pictures adequate for a purchase. Be sure to set yourself up for success.

9. Deposit & Purchase Agreement: After doing steps 1-6, you feel you have found the horse of your dreams. What now? The first thing you want to do is put down a deposit and get a signed purchase agreement. Be sure that the seller agrees you are a good match. Be sure to work out any details such as who pays for transfers, transportation papers, etc. Work out all the details and work together with the seller for a win-win situation. Remember, it's hard on both of you. Coming from both sides of the fence, I enjoy being the buyer much better than being the seller! Selling a horse is very stressful, not just in being responsible but in emotionally letting go of the horse. At some point in the sale, it becomes real that the horse is leaving, and you have to come to terms with it. It is time for you, the buyer, to reassure the seller that you will provide the best home for their horse. For many breeders their life blood is poured into their foals and horses. When a buyer appreciates that, it means a lot.

10. Living your Dream: Now it's time to actually live out your dream of being a horse owner. Keep in mind that the first 30 days are an adjustment period. The horse needs time to settle in, so don't expect him/her to act exactly like he did when you saw him at the seller's farm. There will be a time of testing as to who is in charge, too. Some horses test more than others, but you will need to set those boundaries. Until that horse understands the pecking order, he/she will be frustrated. Recall your videos, clinics, and lessons, because you will need that foundation every day for a while. Even with all your preparation, it still could be 6-12 months before you feel a real bond and true partnership with your horse. I suggest that first-time horse buyers work with a trainer for the first year, so they ensure they're reading their horse correctly and nip bad habits in the bud.

11.

Horses are large animals, and we can easily feel intimidated by them, but with preparation and forethought, you can eliminate almost all of the hassles, frustrations, and financial woes of your first purchase and find the horse of your dreams.

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frustrations and financial woes of finding the horse of your dreams.

Editor's note:

Here are some additional considerations when buying a horse.

- *When dealing with a seller, ask if the price is negotiable. Often it is.*
- *Find out whether the horse is registered and ask to see his registration certificate. Make sure it is an original. If you have a question about it, call the registry for clarification.*
- *Find out if the seller is the last recorded owner. If not, ask why. A transfer form is only valid if signed by the last recorded owner.*
- *Ask why they are selling the horse.*