



RIP

There are several options for retiring a polo pony

Everyone has had a pony at one time or another that can no longer perform for us for a variety of reasons. It may be something as simple as getting old or sometimes the more complicated behavioral or soundness issue that renders a horse unable to continue to play polo, or just a lack of suitability between horse and rider. What are our options and what makes the most sense for each situation? Options range from sale to euthanasia, depending on the circumstances for that particular horse. Only you, your budget and the circumstances surrounding each situation will determine which option is best for you and your horse.

Horses that are serviceable can be sold either privately or through consignment to a public auction. Private sales can be time-consuming, may cost some money and are sometimes difficult to consummate but they usually give you the most control over where your horse ends up. Horses that can no longer play because of age or soundness issues but still serviceable in a limited capacity can make great kids' or lesson horses. A public auction is another way of selling a horse. It involves consigning the horse to an auctioneer and allowing any potential buyer to bid on the animal. The upside to an auction is that it presents the horse to a large group of potential buyers; the downside is that the seller has only very limited control over the horse's new home. Setting a reserve price is a way to prevent the horse from ending up in the hands of a slaughter buyer, but the seller may run the risk of the horse not selling and being forced to take the unsold horse back home.

Serviceable horses also may be donated to nonprofit organizations. These groups can include educational facilities, camps,



After a polo pony is too old to play well, options include selling it, sending it out to pasture or donating it to a nonprofit organization to be cared for until death.

therapeutic riding programs and mounted-police academies. Some donated horses are used for riding lesson programs or sports teams (for example, college polo teams). But many horses that are donated to educational facilities are used for teaching and research purposes and then euthanized following their use. Before agreeing to donate a horse the owner should clearly understand the intended use for the horse upon donation and should also check on the care the donated animal will receive in order to avoid any confusion or disappointment.

Some other institutions may take a horse with the intent of selling it to raise money. It is crucial that the owner be absolutely candid about the horse with these institutions. For example, a college polo program or therapeutic riding academy would not want a horse with a behavioral problem. The donation option

comes with the added benefit of a tax deduction to the horse owner, to the extent allowed by the law. Not every horse will be accepted by a nonprofit organization. The size of the facility, the suitability of the horse for its intended use and other factors play a role in how many horses an institution may support.

Some serviceable horses may qualify to be donated to a horse-rescue facility. Horse-rescue facilities are generally different from horse humane organizations. Rescue facilities take in horses that are basically healthy but may need some rehab. The facility may do the rehab if necessary and place them in new homes. Humane groups take in abused and neglected horses, attempt to restore them to health and place them in another home. If you choose to donate a horse to a rescue facility, the facility should be thoroughly investigated to ensure that it is

a reputable organization. In most states, horse-rescue operations are not licensed and do not need to adhere to any state-mandated regulations for the care and disposition of donated animals. Specific rules exist at most of these rescue organizations regarding the type of horse that they will accept for donation. For example, horse-rescue groups exist for certain breeds of horses, including thoroughbreds and standardbreds.

There is also the option of retiring your horse, either on your own farm or to a retirement facility. Occasionally you might get lucky if a friend or neighbor offers you the use of his farm to retire your horse. Retirement facilities offer a place for the horse to live out the rest of its days. Although most retirement facilities specialize in geriatric horses, not all old horses qualify. Retirement farms generally accept only those horses that are in reasonably good health and will not require extreme veterinary care. Most retirement homes are not free. Many of the nonprofit types require a one-time donation at the time of the horse's placement to help cover the costs of their operation, while other farms that are operated on a for-profit basis have annual or monthly charges.

To ensure that your horse will be cared for as you wish, it is important to check out the facility's physical layout for adequate space for the number of horses on the premises and safe stalls, run-in sheds and fencing, the feeding program, the hoof-care program and the veterinary program. Even though the horse is no longer playing it still will require minimal deworming, annual dentistry and vaccinations and hoof care (trimming as needed) to stay comfortable and healthy.

Euthanasia is a widely available and frequently used option to deal with unhealthy or unwanted horses. Euthanasia can be performed by many local large-animal veterinarians. To ensure the safety and comfort of the animal, euthanasia should be performed only by a licensed veterinarian. In addition to organizing for a vet to perform the procedure, arrangements must also be made by the owner for the disposal of the body. In most states the law requires that the body be removed within 24 hours. Owners can

choose to have their horse buried either on their property or in a pet cemetery. Burial of a dead animal, especially one the size of a horse, must meet the requirements of the Environmental Protection Act as well as any state or local ordinances. Some areas do not allow large animal burial while others have limits on the number of large animals that can be buried within a certain area and/or where the burial can take place, how far from water sources, or a residence, etc.

Horse owners choosing to bury their horse in a pet cemetery need to arrange to have the body of the horse transported to the burial site. A few pet cemeteries offer cremation services whereby a horse can be cremated individually and the ashes returned to the owner or spread upon a chosen site at the cemetery. Other options for disposal of euthanized horses are composting or rendering. Composting of animals must be done within compliance of the Dead Animal Disposal Act. A renderer can also be contacted to come and pick up the remains and dispose of them properly.

Another option is to sell the horse to a slaughterhouse. This option is sometimes chosen for horses that can no longer perform their job because of lameness, permanent debilitation, age or serious behavioral problems. It is also an option for an owner who can no longer finance caring for a horse.

These are the options that are currently available for horses that have reached the end of their time, either in life or with their present owner. As with all aspects of responsible care for our horses, it is ultimately the owner's right and obligation to choose the option that is best for himself and his animal. In making that choice, be honest with potential owners/caretakers, be honest with yourself and, most important, be honest with your horse.

This article was written with the assistance of Donna Ewing, president of the Hooved Animal Rescue and Protection Society of Barrington Hills, Illinois. HARPS is a nonprofit organization that rescues and rehabilitates abused and neglected horses and other hooved animals. Call HARPS at (847) 382-0503. Or you can find them on the World Wide Web at www.harpsonline.org. ♦