

Horse Auctions

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Auctions seem to attract people like car smashes do. There are plenty of onlookers and often not too many real participants (apart from clearing sales). But I generally enjoy them (auctions, not car smashes). Dismissing the time and expense of travelling to an auction or clearing sale and the better part of the day spent there, I am always on the lookout for a bargain.

More often than not, it's just a social outing for rural folk at the country clearing sale, and as many of them drive utes, they may as well bid on some 'stuff' to make the trip worthwhile. Often I'm amazed at how a person or family's complete collection of farming and personal belongings (and a lot of junk) can be lined up in a paddock in the morning and all be gone by sunset – and be converted to cash too. I wonder too at how much of what is on offer at a clearing sale has been bought at other clearing sales. Recycling in its original form. Well, it keeps it out of landfills, I guess.

But this piece is really about horse auctions. I've been to a few and in fact bought one of my horses at a horse auction. My attraction for auctions stops when animals are involved. And it goes into reverse when horses are the chattels. And just this past weekend I attended a 'horse expo' and yep, you guessed it, the most popular part of the day was the horse auction. While it was on, I packed up and went home. I did not want to be a part of or near the 'action'.

In many ways I find it challenging to sell a horse. First comes the process of deciding to sell him or not and why? What is his use and more importantly what is his 'value'? Value is not just monetary and has to be considered with what sort of life is he experiencing and does that need changing? Couple these considerations with our 'relationship' and the experiences that the horse and I have had over the period together and soon the realisation that the 'black and whiteness' of the selling situation is becoming all shades and tones of grey. And I haven't even considered his potential new owner! It can be like selling one of your children, or perhaps more appropriately, one of your pets.

But at horse auctions, these thoughts, this type of thinking, seems to not be present in many sellers minds.

I also reckon a lot of people go to horse auctions for a bit of entertainment. Whether it is an 'elite' horse auction, a herd dispersal or just a regular monthly affair at the saleyards, among the crowd there are a lot of gawkers, a few bargain hunters and a handful of rescuers and of course, the sometimes nervous owners of the horses.

Part of the show is the auctioneer and his antics; his 'playing the crowd'. He is also quite often a person who can stretch the truth about the potential, breeding, background and other saleable characteristics of the subject horse. And every now and then he ends up with no real buyer even though he loudly and enthusiastically announced bids coming in thick and fast.

From the horse's perspective, going to a horse auction would have to be a pretty scary experience. Firstly he has been taken from his usual surroundings, his home and paddock buddies, and put into a truck or float. When the rattles stop and he is unloaded, the head goes uuuup. "What is this place? Where is the grass? Why are those other horses scared? What are all these yards? Why does this place give me a bad feeling? What is going on here?"

It gets worse though. The horse is then put into one of the steel and concrete yards surrounded by predators. They are making a lot of noise and all eyes are on the horse. "What IS going on here?" Then someone starts shouting – more and more – louder and louder and ends with "Sold for three hundred and fifty dollars". The horse doesn't know it but that was probably his death sentence.

A horse owner who enters a horse in a horse auction often just wants to get rid of it. It may have problems. It may have developed bad behaviour. It might kick, buck or bite. It may have bad hooves, bad conformation or might just be old. Or it might be stubborn and unwilling. It may be unco-operative, a bad floater, or a 'puller'. It could even be jumpy, nervous and unreliable. Or simply, the horse and owner just don't get along. Sadly, the pattern developed with a lot of these poor horse/human relationships that end up at the saleyards often has little to do with the horse.

When selling a horse at a horse auction, the words 'buyer beware' are very appropriate. Problems are often offloaded at horse auctions onto some unsuspecting buyer. But for the average auction price, what else would one expect?

The 'Just getting rid of it' paradigm relies on a couple of intrinsic factors. The base price for the horse is 'dogging' money; around three hundred and fifty dollars. If that is all it makes, it covers the cost of the trip and the agent's commission. If the horse is a good looker, then perhaps the sale price will be more because the slaughter house buyers usually pull out at the three fifty mark and some private buyers may bid on. And to the vendor, it doesn't really matter about who buys the horse. The care factor for the horse in the auction has probably been reduced to zero or close to it.

My personal process of selling a horse and having a horse put into an auction to sell are at the opposite ends of the spectrum.

So what is the 'real' value of a horse? In dollar terms the value can be arrived at by adding up all the input costs and time in getting a horse up to a certain stage. Recently I crunched the numbers to arrive at a surprisingly large amount for a four year old, average, riding horse. The final figure will vary somewhat depending on your own valuation of pasture, fertiliser, infrastructure, time and a few other minor factors. The number I came up with for the above four year old horse, just started, is between five and seven thousand dollars. Yes, you read correctly. Selling a four year old riding horse for anything less than five or six grand is incurring a big financial loss.

To my way of thinking, selling a horse at an auction for 'dogging money' seems to not allow for the fact that the horse has a soul, it has feelings and emotions, it has intelligence and in many cases has carried its owner on its back either in competitions, pony club experiences or just an occasional weekend ride in the bush somewhere.

Perhaps they deserve better than that?