

The Importance of Establishing Definitions in Talking about Horses By Bonnie Martin

Most people who have had horses for any length of time have stories of their own or have at least heard accounts of people buying horses that didn't turn out to be what they thought they were getting. Some were described as "childsafes", "bombproof", or "broke" and then the new owner got an unpleasant surprise after getting to know the horse better. Often the new owners decide that the seller misrepresented and perhaps even drugged the animal, and of course either is a possibility.

However, there could be another explanation. It may be more of a miscommunication problem rather than an out-and-out misrepresentation. There are many different levels of horsemanship and lots of different activities that require different sets of skills for both horse and rider. People define some of the terms based on their interests and experiences, and those definitions can be very different depending on the people and their horsemanship.

Let's take the term "broke" and look at it. In the context of horses, according to a dictionary definition, it means "to tame" or "to train to obedience". However, the level of training and obedience is open to various interpretations!

To some, "broke" might simply mean a horse that can be mounted and moved around without bucking its rider off. It may not mean that there is much quality to the movement or communication between the horse and rider or even that the horse is comfortable and settled with being ridden.

At the other extreme, some might not consider a horse broke until the level of training reaches the point that the rider and horse make all the movements look fluid and effortless, with the horse responding willingly and to subtle cues given by the rider.

The word "green" is often added in front of "broke" to indicate a horse that has been started under saddle but whose training has not progressed to a finished state. Even this term though has multiple meanings to different people. I've heard a well-respected clinician say that most horses need a thousand or so hours of work under saddle to get beyond the "green" designation. Other people would stop calling their horse green broke with a lot less time being put into the training.

A “child’s horse” may be one that is a babysitter type of horse that will willingly fill in for a young rider’s mistakes and go on, or it might simply mean a horse that hasn’t done more than maybe have a child on its back and was led around.

I know a novice adult who thought he was getting a great beginners’ horse for himself because it was advertised as a “child’s horse”. He got quite a surprise to find out that the horse wasn’t ok with many things both on the ground and under saddle. He was flat out impossible for the farrier to trim, and he had a lot of fears and quirks that needed a knowledgeable trainer to deal with. Upon further inquiry he found out that the horse had been led around with kids on his back. He didn’t have much other training and certainly wasn’t a good choice for a beginner rider to safely learn on.

Subjective words are important too. Words such as “good”, don’t mean the same things to everyone. I’ve talked to many people who want a “good” trail horse and are happy to have one that will merely meander down the trails following another horse and doing what it does. Other people might define a good trail horse as being one that covers the ground quickly. Some don’t care if the horse is fine tuned in its training, others expect a good trail horse to be able to respond to the rider in all kinds of situations, being able to stop easily, back up, negotiate all kinds of obstacles, sidepass, and not just go down the trail making its own decisions about direction and speed but instead listening to the rider’s cues.

Years ago, I knew some people with some young horses they had not started riding yet. I was surprised to see them advertised as “under saddle”, a term that is usually understood to mean being ridden. When I asked them how the riding was going, they responded that they weren’t being ridden yet, just being lunged with saddles on. Difference in interpretation of a term, for sure!

Making sure you are on the same wavelength with definitions becomes particularly important if you are shopping for a horse. It can not only mean the difference between getting what you want or a disappointment, but it can also save you a lot of time in your search. Ask lots of questions and make sure you understand the seller’s definitions of terms instead of assuming the words mean the same thing to both of you. I sure wish I had followed this advice in some of my horse dealings!