

# EQUUS EXTRA

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### ***YOUR HORSE'S RETIREMENT***

- Questions to ask
- Options to consider
- Do's and Don'ts



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# Planning Your Horse's RETIREMENT

Here are five popular options to consider when your horse becomes too old or infirm to continue his current activities.

By Alana Harrison

**R**etiring my Thoroughbred gelding, Memphis, from the show ring was an extremely difficult and emotional decision for me. Not only did I feel a sense of grief over losing what had been a big part of my life, but I was also overwhelmed by the question of what was next for our life together.

Memphis, who was 19 years old at the time, had been my faithful partner in hunter/jumper competition for 14 years. Every time we entered the ring, all of life's stresses melted away, and I was enveloped by a surreal sense of calm. It was just me and my horse, depending on each other.

So when the question of retiring Memphis loomed, it was difficult to contemplate giving all of that up. But in the end, I had no choice. Long before I'd come to own him, Memphis had been involved in an accident that left a baseball-sized chunk of bone missing from his right hip.



While he'd been sound throughout his long show career, the unmistakable signs of arthritis set in as he aged. I realized that continuing to ride him in the demanding sport of jumping would hasten the deterioration of his joints, keeping him comfortable would be difficult and worse, his risk of catastrophic injury would grow. I wanted to do right by my friend and repay him for all that he had given me.

It was clear Memphis needed to retire from showing, but what exactly did that mean? For people, retirement used to mean an office party with a sheet cake,

followed by a move to warmer climates. But nowadays people take much more varied paths at the end of their working life. The same is true for horses. Equine retirement can mean anything from a change in occupation to a minor scaling back of activity to life as a pasture ornament. The best choice for a particular horse—and the people in his life—depends on several factors.

I deliberated for nearly a year on the best retirement plan for Memphis. As I considered our situation, I talked to many horsepeople to learn what they had done

and how it had worked out for them.

The answers were as varied as the individual horses. There is no one-size-fits-all equine retirement plan.

While no one but you can decide what retirement will look like for your horse, I can share what I have learned. Here's a look at five options, with insights from riders who chose them for their horses. Hopefully, when it's time to consider your horse's future, their experiences will help you decide which plan might be best for you and your horse.

## OPTION #1: CHANGE HIS CAREER

If you are engaged in a physically demanding sport but continuing to ride your horse is more important to you than competition, consider finding a new activity that he can manage and that you can enjoy together.

A former jumper may no longer be able to endure the physical stress of the sport, for instance, but may be well suited for trail riding or even participating in endurance events. Or, depending on your horse's condition, you might still be able to compete with him in lower-impact activities like equitation on the flat or Western dressage.

After bone and soft-tissue injuries required Sharon Witherspoon of Bells,



Texas, to retire her Paint mare, Aria, from jumping at age 13, the horse woman began researching other activities in which they could excel without causing her mare pain or risking serious injury.

"Before showing over fences, we competed in hunt seat and Western riding classes, so Aria was used to switching gears between English and Western events," Witherspoon says. "So, hunter under saddle, equitation and ranch riding were obvious choices for us."

With practice and determination, Witherspoon and Aria mastered the maneuvers required in equitation patterns. So much so that in "retirement," they were crowned world champions in Amateur Solid Paint-Bred Hunt Seat Equitation at the 2017 APHA World Championship Show.

The pair's new lifestyle, however, extends well beyond the show ring.

### GOLDEN YEARS:

The close bond that Alana Harrison developed with her gelding Memphis through show competition became even stronger after the gelding's retirement.

Witherspoon finds trail riding with Aria enjoyable and physically beneficial in this new phase of their partnership. "Trail riding has helped foster the bond Aria and I share, and it's provided her with valuable real-life experi-

ence by teaching her lessons we couldn't get anywhere else—from negotiating rough terrain to encountering wildlife to building endurance and confidence," she says. "It's also a great tool for keeping Aria's mind fresh and preventing arena or show-ring burnout by incorporating variety into her routine."

**Pros:** Helping your older horse make the transition to a new job or career means that you will not only continue riding him but you'll also be connected to his day-to-day care. In addition, moderate low-impact exercise will help your horse maintain fitness, flexibility and muscle tone—all of which are beneficial as he grows older.

**Cons:** Unless your budget allows you to purchase or lease another horse, you will have to make a trade-off—giving up riding or competition in your preferred area.

## DO'S AND DON'TS OF EQUINE RETIREMENT

- **DON'T** retire your horse "cold turkey." If he is accustomed to having a daily job and sense of purpose and you suddenly turn him out on pasture, the resulting stress may take a toll on his physical and mental health.
- **DO** put a retirement plan in

place for your horse so you'll be prepared to help him make the transition when the time comes.

- **DO** allow your older horse to adapt to his new environment or lifestyle slowly.
- **DO** make only one lifestyle change at a time so you can

carefully monitor how your horse reacts and reduce his stress as much as possible.

- **DO** keep your retired horse on a schedule. Maintain your usual feeding routine, veterinary care plan and farriery schedule.
- **DON'T** stop providing your

horse with exercise. If all of his activities suddenly stop, he will lose muscle tone, cardiovascular fitness and flexibility. He might not be able to jump or perform sliding stops anymore, but he will benefit from regular, low-impact exercise.



## OPTION #2: LEASE HIM AS A “SCHOOLMASTER”

If you want to remain competitive in your current sport, but your horse can no longer safely or happily participate, consider leasing or half-leasing him to a rider at a lower level. In dressage, these horses—often called “schoolmasters”—are in high demand. In the hunter/jumper and equitation realms, they are referred to as “packer” ponies and, here too, the demand, especially among young riders, outstrips the supply.

Many aging horses thrive under these leasing arrangements: The activity helps them stay in shape and also gives them a sense of purpose. Retaining ownership through a leasing agreement enables you to maintain control over—or at least monitor—your horse’s care. Plus, the extra income will help you save for his future care if your older horse is eventually unable to be ridden.

Four years ago, Rachel Rode of Dallas, Texas, retired her then 18-year-old gelding True Masterpiece from the hunter/jumper ring when she and her trainer recognized some troubling signs. “He was sometimes sore and cranky after jumping and his joints were becoming increasingly stiff, especially after a hard workout,” Rode says. “That was really out



**GOOD BALANCE:** Rachel Rode half-leases her retired hunter/jumper True to novice riders for walk-trot classes and lessons. “He enjoys continuing to have a job he’s good at,” she says.

of the ordinary for True. He had always loved his job.”

Rode scaled back her own riding activities with True—sticking to light trail riding—but she knew he would need more activity to be happy. So, she half-leases him to young and beginning riders for walk-trot classes and lessons.

“True is great with kids, and I think he enjoys continuing to have a job he’s good at,” Rode says. “I can tell he’s in good

spirits. He loves human interaction, and I think as long as he has that, he’ll be a happy camper for the rest of his life.”

For this retirement plan to be a viable option, however, your horse must have a calm temperament and a healthy amount of patience. A high-strung horse who spooks easily or is difficult to control won’t be a good fit for an inexperienced rider seeking a lease. If there’s any question about your horse’s suitability, have an experienced trainer evaluate him to ensure the safety of all involved.

**Pros:** Leasing or half-leasing your older horse to a novice rider will provide him with a routine and sense of purpose, and the exercise will benefit his health. The additional money can help you save for his care when he needs to fully retire, or provide extra funds to purchase or lease another horse if you want to continue competing in your favorite event.

**Cons:** Depending on the terms of the lease, you might lose some control over your horse’s care. With this in mind, consult with a lawyer when drawing up a leasing agreement.

## OPTION #3: MAKE HIM A THERAPY HORSE

Therapeutic riding facilities are always looking for healthy, sound and

In many parts of the horse world, the demand for reliable old schoolmasters outstrips the supply.



even-tempered horses. In addition to programs designed for people with physical and mental disabilities, equine-based therapy can help those struggling with addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and other challenges.

By necessity however, therapy programs typically have extremely high standards when it comes to temperament, regardless of a horse's accomplishments in the show ring.

Yet, sometimes this option works out wonderfully for old show horses. In addition to her primary training program, Amanda Reed Hollinger of Dillsburg, Pennsylvania, offers lessons to physically and mentally challenged riders using horses retired from their previous jobs.

One of her most successful therapy horses, accomplished Western pleasure competitor Gorgeousorkie, was given to Hollinger after he was retired from stud at age 16. Once gelded, he made an ideal therapeutic mount.

"He's the kind of horse you can put anyone on—a truly once-in-a-lifetime horse," Hollinger says. Several of her therapeutic students ride "George," including 29-year-old Erin Fox, who has osteogenesis imperfecta (OI), commonly known as brittle-bone disease. This condition, which prevents the body from producing enough collagen to develop strong bones, makes it difficult for Fox to maintain fitness and build muscle tone through traditional methods of exercise.

Riding George has helped her regain mobility and build muscle. "Because riding doesn't put a lot of stress on my bones, I've been able to build muscle in my legs, back and arms, and I'm getting progressively stronger the more I ride," Fox says. "My doctors are amazed that riding has enabled me to make so much progress. Riding George has helped me more than any other type of physical therapy. And I've tried them all."

**Pros:** Your horse will likely enjoy being a therapy horse, and donating him



**If continuing to ride your horse is more important to you than competition, consider finding a new activity that he can physically manage and that you can enjoy together.**

will help those in need. Also, your horse will in all likelihood be very well cared for at a therapeutic riding facility.

**Cons:** Not all horses have the temperament necessary for therapeutic riding programs. If you're uncertain about your horse's suitability, consider inquiring about a trial period.

## PLAN #4: FIND HIM A NEW HOME

As much as you'd love to keep your horse forever, finances or logistics sometimes make that impossible. Although it can initially be tough to think about, you might decide that selling your horse is the best option. You don't have to send him to a total stranger, though: You can sell—or give—him to a friend, family member

or a reputable local riding program suitable to his health and skill set. The new situation can make everyone happy.

After an injury and long lay-up sidelined her 14-year-old Appendix Quarter Horse, Look Who's Trucking, from pursuing a career in eventing, it became necessary for Sherry Kneipper of Dallas, Texas, to find a new home for the gelding. She turned to her longtime friend and fellow equestrian Christie Gard, who now resides in Los Angeles, California. Gard had recently graduated from college and was on a tight budget, so Kneipper offered "Gus" to her for a small purchase price.

"While I've been riding most of my life and wouldn't classify myself as a beginner, I suffered a knee injury that limits what I can do in the saddle," Gard says. "So Gus ended up being the perfect horse for me. We trail ride in the Hollywood Hills and take walk-trot-canter and cross-rail lessons at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center. I send Sherry photos and updates on Gus at least once a week, which she really appreciates. It really put her mind at ease that I was able to take him."

Like Gus, your older horse could have a happy retirement with another rider whose needs match his temperament and current physical capabilities. And by putting him in the hands of someone you trust, you can take comfort in knowing that his new owner will love and care for him the way you did. It may, however, take time to find the right placement, even if you put the word out in your local horse community through social media and word of mouth.

If you have to rehome your horse with someone you don't know, consider requiring a sales contract that guarantees you first right of refusal. Then, if for any reason the new owner decides to sell the horse in the future, you will have the option of taking him back. Consult a lawyer for contract advice.

**Pros:** With forethought and savvy networking, rehoming your horse with



a trustworthy person or riding program will give you some control over his future. If his new home is local, you'll likely be able to visit him.

**Cons:** If you sell him outright, you will lose control over your horse's care—and possibly the ability to visit him.

## OPTION #5: FULL RETIREMENT

As a general rule, horses are healthier and live longer when they remain active for as long as possible. Regular, planned exercise—even just walking—helps maintain muscle mass and keeps arthritis in check.

But in some circumstances a horse needs to be retired from all work. Perhaps he is only “pasture sound,” meaning he's comfortable only when allowed to move at his own pace and volition. Or, he may be unsafe to work around due to neurological issues. Fully retiring your horse can be a tough call, but your veterinarian can help you decide.

Of course, full retirement means more than simply turning a horse out in a pasture and walking away. For starters, he may get lonely, especially if he has lived an active life traveling to events and interacting with other horses. Look for a place where he can join a small, stable herd; the ideal companions are other horses, but burros or goats have been known to keep equine retirees happy.

Also remember that senior horses often have a harder time adjusting to changes in climate, herd hierarchy and new surroundings. As horses age, for example, they're less able to cope with heat and humidity, as well as cold weather. Social factors are also important: If your show horse has spent most of his life living in a stall and you suddenly turn him out to pasture with a new herd, he might have trouble competing for food, shade or shelter.

Finally, some horses have trouble mentally adjusting to full retirement. Stories abound of retired competitors whinnying and kicking stall doors as stablemates are loaded up to go to an event. Such horses are often very anxious when left behind in an empty stable. In this case, you might consider giving your horse a new “job” as trailer companion and steadying influence for younger horses heading to shows for the first time. Or, you may want to retire your horse at a busy show barn. It might seem counter-intuitive, but the bustle of activity in the barn aisle can keep your older horse feeling “at home” and like himself even if he never wears a saddle again.

**Pros:** Your horse could live out his

**Leasing means  
your horse can stay  
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monitor—his care.**

days enjoying pasture life and the company of other horses. And if you own or have access to land, you'll be able to keep an eye on him.

**Cons:** For older horses accustomed to living in stalls, pasture life—especially in regions with extreme heat or cold—can be a difficult adjustment. At least in the beginning, additional monitoring may be required.

**W**ith Memphis, retirement involved three primary considerations: Since the age of 7, he had lived on full turnout with a herd of about 30 horses and was accustomed to being able to roam freely with his friends during his off-time. Also, Memphis had a strong work ethic—he enjoyed doing his job and having a sense of purpose. Finally, as a Thoroughbred, he was never lacking for energy and needed some type of regular exercise to keep his mind and pent-up energy in check.

I opted to retire Memphis with a small herd of older horses and a kind-hearted donkey on full-time pasture turnout with plenty of shade, a run-in shed and a constant supply of hay. Memphis could no longer jump or do a lot of trot or canter work due to his arthritis, but I continued to provide him with regular exercise through trail riding, longeing and hand-walking him.

Over the last four years of his life, Memphis and I enjoyed many new adventures together—on the trails and on our walks—and we never lost the incredible bond we shared. In fact, we became even closer.

I unexpectedly lost Memphis last October due to a cerebral hemorrhage, but I take great comfort in knowing I did right by him in his golden years. And I'm grateful that I had the opportunity to reward my friend for the 17 years of devoted service he so willingly gave me. He was happy and healthy for the final chapter of his life. 🐾

