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Must-Have Traits to Look for in A GRAND PRIX JUMPER

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FOR MANY HORSE SHOPPERS, the process starts with a checklist of must-haves for the perfect mount. The ideal candidate must be able to jump a certain height, must not be spooky, and must jump in decent form. It's a bonus if the horse can take a joke from an amateur rider.

For riders, both amateur and professional, competing at the top levels in the Grand Prix jumper ring, however, the list of must-haves is more nuanced. The process also varies as some choose to breed their own horses, while others rely on purchasing horses, both abroad and on home soil. We spoke with a professional and an amateur, both successful in the Grand Prix ring, to understand more about some of the different approaches to finding horses capable of excelling at the highest ranks.

Sloane Coles represented the United States in the 2019 Nations Cup at Spruce Meadows with Springledge LLC's Chippendale's Boy DZ.





Laura Connaway is pictured above on one of her grand prix horses, Ceralena, who is the daughter of her foundation mare and former grand prix mount, Ceranova, and the dam of her five-year-old, Boaz.



Connaway's five-year-old homebred, Boaz (above), is what she refers to as a "do-gooder."

1 CHARACTER COUNTS

Sloane Coles, professional show jumper and trainer out of her own Spring Ledge LLC in The Plains, Virginia, says that for her, it's about a feeling when she sits on the horse. However, the feel of the horse wasn't something Coles could rely on during a pandemic year. "Generally, the right horse will catch my eye, and because feel is so important, I usually want to ride a prospective Grand Prix horse," she said. "However, since we aren't able to travel easily [because of COVID-19] we are watching a lot of videos these days. In that case, you have to be a bit more open minded." This is where a list of must-haves come in, and it begins with the horse's character.

"Character is important for me," said Coles. "I want a horse that is willing to move forward and never goes against the leg. That desire to work and do a job well is so critical when the jumps get to the top of the standards." Her ability to identify character helped her find Chippendale's Boy DZ, the horse that carried her to her first Nations Cup appearance for the United States at Spruce Meadows 'Masters' CSIO5* tournament.

Laura Connaway, founder and president of Connaway & Associates Equine Insurance Services, Inc., is an amateur show jumper and breeder of her own Grand Prix horses in Little Rock, Arkansas. She warns not to be fooled by

a horse's "flash." Finding a "do-gooder" is more important. "A horse that wants to do well by you day in and day out, minute by minute, is what matters," said Connaway.

"I want to be with a horse that wants to be with me and learn my nuances, and at the same time, I want to learn the horse's thought pattern and how to be a good trainer," she added. "The horse and I will learn together through repetition. If the horse is willing, it will learn how to jump clean rounds and become quicker and more confident in jump-offs." For Connaway, this requires identifying the desired traits and breeding accordingly to achieve the ideal top-level jumper.

2 COURAGE AND SMARTS

For Connaway, intelligence and courage go hand-in-hand with character. In her experience, courage develops through a horse's willingness and ambition to please its rider.

That same willingness and ambition Connaway mentions is also something Coles looks for in prospects; it's something she likes to describe as "smarts."

"I want the horse to be smart about where the rails are off the ground. A good horse is intelligent enough to try and leave the rails in the cups and wants to be clear as much as the rider does," Coles said.



3 PHYSICAL STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

Without a doubt, a horse's technique over the fences and across the ground is a trait that most Grand Prix riders consider in their evaluations. In Connaway's case, she doesn't look at technique immediately, but instead, as the breeder of her own mounts, she looks to train a horse that has the appropriate physical form to be a top show jumper.

"Our sport is very demanding and to reach the top, a horse must be sound enough for rigorous training," Connaway said. "Good physical form allows the horse to jump at a top level with less stress on the body than a horse that might be less ideally formed. Less stress means their job is easier and gives them sheer enjoyment!"

Coles talks about technique and ability in terms of scope and carefulness. "Grand Prix prospects should have scope to spare and be careful enough to clear the big jumps," she said. To determine this, a lot of it goes back to the feeling Coles gets in the saddle. "I can usually tell right away based on how the horse feels when I am riding it. I want a good feeling off the ground," she added. In lieu of being able to sit on the horse, Coles says she will want to see that the prospect doesn't appear to be trying too hard to get over the jumps.

Sloane Coles and De Vleut, her current FEI mount owned by Avalon Partners BV, competing at the Great Lakes Equestrian Festival.

"I want a horse that is willing to move forward and never goes against the leg. That desire to work and do a job well is so critical when the jumps get to the top of the standards."

—SLOANE COLES

Both Coles and Connaway emphasize trust in the process and trust in the horse. When Coles was shopping for her most recent Grand Prix mount virtually, she recalled that he wasn't spectacular in videos. "By having faith in a friend that helps me find horses in Europe, I was confident he was going to be a fit for me. The first time I jumped him he was super, and I knew it was right."

Connaway, on the other hand, works to bring out the best in horses that she has personally bred and places a lot of trust in her breeding and training processes. She currently has a five-year-old that she says she would not have sought out to purchase because he is too big, and initially he was spooky and lacked confidence. So, for Connaway, it came back to trusting the horse's character, knowing the rest would likely fall into place.

"I can still visualize him as a three-year-old," Connaway said. "His face said, 'Put me in, Coach—is it my turn?!' He wants to be my partner, and he wants to learn and be praised for progress. His character helped him to build confidence and develop great physical form and technique. I adore him to no end, and he is my next Grand Prix horse, I have no doubt."

Coles and Connaway have attained top Grand Prix mounts through very different approaches, but they agree that what matters most is that you enjoy and trust the process. *am*