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Risking it All:

The Purchase of *PSG Final* without Performing a Pre-Purchase Examination

**The Story**

The crowd roars as Max Kühner and his eight-year-old wonder horse, *PSG Final*, soar over the last fence of the jump-off round in Stuttgart, Germany and take the lead with a time of 56.65 seconds. Although Kühner and *Final* had produced a slow and steady round, they had left the fences upright, putting pressure on the other riders to produce a quick and clear round. Just four riders would have the opportunity to chase Kühner and *Final*.

It was beginning to look like Kühner and *Final* would take home the victory in the Longines World Cup Grand Prix, until Pieter Devos and his longtime partner, *Apart* would eventually sneak ahead of Kühner and *Final* to claim victory. Although *Final* did not win the feature competition, he had shown the world what remarkable ability he has. Gracefully flying through the air, jumping the 1.6-meter fences with ease, *Final* clearly showed he was one of the best horses of the world.

Just one month later, however, *Final*, the eight-clear-old superstar, would leave Kühner’s stable for Edwina Tops-Alexander, a female Australian rider whose husband, Jan Tops, had purchased the horse to strengthen her string of top Grand Prix horses. Kühner, devasted to be losing a future star from his stable as well as parting with a horse he had created a bond with stated to *WorldofShowJumping.com* in December 2018, “I’m sad to lose such a talent like PSG Final, who allowed me some big dreams. But, at least he is in a top stable to continue his promising career.”

Tops-Alexander would not see *Final* in her magnificent stable for long, as *Final* would gain interest from another top-level rider from Ireland, Cian O’Connor. Along with the rest of the show jumping world, O’Connor was so infatuated with the horse and his ability that he felt he had to have him.

Upon speaking with Jan Tops, O’Connor learned that the horse would be sold, but only at a high price without a trial. Jeroen Dubbeldam, a past Olympic Champion and horse dealer who has sold a number of expensive horses states that “in the industry, it is normal for the customer to try the horse over some fences before proceeding to the pre-purchase examination. In some special cases, when a horse is very expensive, a trial is not permitted and the buyer can only perform a vet check.” With such a high price on *Final* and the risk that is involved when horses are tried by new riders, O’Connor would have to purchase the horse without a trial.

O’Connor, a past Olympic medalist and numerous Grand Prix winner, has ridden hundreds of different horses, so purchasing *Final* without a trial did not make him question his desire for the young up and coming champion. Additionally, O’Connor would not be able to have his veterinarian perform a pre-purchase examination. Due to significant interest from other potential buyers and the probability that the horse would be quickly sold, *Final* would have to be sold without a pre-purchase examination.

Purchasing the horse without his veterinarian performing a pre-purchase examination on the horse, however, was a massive risk that most would not take. Tyler Davis, a veterinarian at Palm Beach Equine Clinic in Wellington, Florida, states that “to buy a horse without a vet check, you have to be a gambler. Or you have to have the money or have someone that has the money that is willing to take the risk if something goes wrong.” Together with an unnamed German sponsor, O’Connor purchased the wonder horse for an incredible €8 million Euro.

**The Pre-Purchase Examination**

A pre-purchase examination can include numerous tests and analysis of the horse, however, veterinarians across the world tend to follow a standard pre-purchase examination that includes a physical analysis of the horse, a movement analysis, and an x-ray analysis.

A physical analysis of a horse is as important as the other two components of the pre-purchase examination. Here, the veterinarian examines the well-being of the horse taking note of the weight, muscular definition and distribution. Show jumping horses are athletes and must be fit. Proper maintenance of the horse’s muscle tone and body is crucial to the success of the horse. Veterinarians can often deduct a rider’s tendencies when riding horses based on the muscle definition of their horses. Extensive definition of muscles on one side might signify that a rider is working too much on that side and should instead work more in the opposite direction. Checking its coat – the color and condition of it can speak volumes about a horse’s health. A shiny, bright coat is ideal. “A dull, spotty coat usually signifies that a horse is not maintaining a healthy diet, work, and rest schedule” says Tyler Davis. Scars, scuffs, or open wounds if present are also examined during the physical. Davis, a highly respected equine veterinarian in the field, mentions that when he performs a physical analysis, “I make sure to check the hooves of the horse. Shoeing as well as the growth of the feet can say a lot about a horse before you even get further into the pre-purchase examination.” Checking the horse’s breathing as well as looking into its eyes and examining them can tell a great deal about a horse’s past as well as future. Past problems in the lungs such as blockages, for example, can affect the horse’s performance in the arena as without proper amount of oxygen, the horse is unable to jump and compete at maximum potential. Taking the horse’s temperature during the pre-purchase examination is essential. a “pre-purchase examination is a snapshot of the horse in three or so hours,” according to Davis, but if a horse has a fever or is not within the ideal temperature of 99.5 to 101.5 °F, it is necessary to know the cause of the change.

The movement analysis of a horse is essential to understanding the well-being of the horse. A veterinarian begins by examining the horse at the walk on a straight line as well as in a circle. These tests are performed on hard ground usually on concrete and if available, soft ground, such as an arena. Then, the veterinarian examines the horse trotting, again both on hard and soft grounds. During this portion of the movement analysis, the veterinarian is making sure the movement on both sides of the horse is equal. Swaying of the hind end, an imbalance in the front portion of the horse, or differences in the hooves landing on the ground are all signs of lameness in a horse. Detecting future lameness is very important and is a skill that veterinarians can study for years, but mainly need experience doing. Phillippe Benoit, a veterinarian and researcher based between the United States and France, states that “I pride myself in being able to analyze a horse’s movement and finding the problems within a horse. This is due to my 27 years in the industry.” The second portion of the movement analysis of a horse includes examining the horse after the joints of the legs have been flexed. During these flexions, the veterinarian bends the legs at the joint of interest then sends the horse trotting with an individual holding the horsewith a lead and examining the movement of the animal. The horses usually appear to be stiff or lame for a short time then hopefully loosen up as they trot further. These flexions are designed to replicate the flexing of the joints when a horse takes off at a jump. Therefore, without jumping the horse, a vet can tell whether or not the horse is hurt either on takeoff, in the air, or landing. The veterinarian usually rates the horse on a 0-5 scale with 0 being completely sound and 5 being hopping lame or clearly in a great deal of pain.

While not considered as a standard practice in all pre-purchase examinations, some veterinarians find examining the horse under tack with a rider offers valuable information. Tyler Davis mentions that he is known for preferring to view the horse under tack, “almost with all pre-purchase examinations now, I like to view the horse with a rider. It doesn’t have to be the current rider or even the future rider, but just someone that can sit in the saddle and apply pressure onto the horse’s back.” The pressure that comes from a saddle as well as the rider’s weight could expose a weakness in the horse or a potential issue that needs to be discovered before the horse is sold. Similarly, the feeling of having a bit in the horse’s mouth could cause the horse to expose an irregularity in their movement. Some horses can exhibit bit-shyness where the horse is unaccepting of the bit and instead of moving in their normal gait, they tend to move as though they are afraid to move forward. While this is not a significant problem in a horse, the potential buyer should be aware of it. Viewing the horse under tack offers precious information therefore Davis believes “it will become a part of the standard pre-purchase examination in the future.”

The final portion of a standard pre-purchase examination is examining the horse’s radiographs or x-rays. While a veterinarian can thoroughly analyze the horse from the outside, it is essential to view the bones of the horse as they are what make up the support system of its body. Currently, the standard parts of a horse that are examined with an x-ray machine are all four legs. That being said, it is becoming more common to examine the horse’s back and neck as well. According to Tyler Davis, “all horses at Palm Beach Equine Clinic that receive a pre-purchase have their legs, back and neck scanned. Then, if there are more parts of the body that need to be checked out, we x-ray those as well.” Davis prefers to perform x-rays at the end of the pre-purchase examination as he finds examining the horse physically as well as its movement tends to lead him towards a problem if present. “Rather than spending the customer’s money scanning all parts of the horse, I prefer to focus on and scan parts of the horse that stick out to me during the physical and the movement analysis.” When veterinarians take x-rays, they are looking for irregularities in the bone structure - chips, which are parts of the bone that have separated off, bone cracks, or cysts, which are holes in the bone where fluid has entered and caused the hole to expand. These irregularities must be taken seriously as they could cause potential lameness in the horse, or never affect the horse at all. Skilled and experienced veterinarians have the ability to make a judgement call as to what the future of the horse will be given its current bone structure.

A recent addition to standard pre-purchase examinations is the analysis of the history of a horse. Data analysis of a horse’s competition record as well as its past x-ray images, if available, offer key insight that must not overlooked. “You don’t want to see large gaps or breaks in competition performance two years in a row,” says Phillippe Benoit, “usually this means that a horse has a reoccurring issue in its health that is causing it to miss out on competing.” Other veterinarians reiterate the importance of data analysis and data science. Davis states that “modern-day competition results and the ease at which everybody can access them has been a huge benefit of the modernization of show jumping.” Before competition results were not online in massive databases, you could not know the performance history of a horse beside what has been spoken through word of mouth.

**The *Final* Purchase**

While O’Connor’s purchase of *PSG Final* without a pre-purchase examination for such a price is a massive gamble, the horse’s competition history was spotless according to the FEI Database. The horse had been consistent in competition without any large gaps since it began competing internationally around when it was just 5 years old. Furthermore, Tops and Tops-Alexander had performed a pre-purchase examination before purchasing the horse from *Final’s* original rider, Max Kühner. Tops and Tops-Alexander are known for their excellent maintenance and care of their horses, so O’Connor did not have to worry about the horse deteriorating in the short month that the horse was in their stable.

O’Connor is also known to pay close attention to his horse’s care as well as their daily regimen. His staff, managers, and horse caretakers all work together as a team to ensure the horses are in the best condition possible.

The Irishman’s purchase of *Final* raises the question of the future importance of pre-purchase examinations. Data analysis of a horse’s competition record, together with proper care of a horse, appropriate combination of work and rest, and finally maintenance of the horse’s wellbeing with a skilled and experienced veterinarian could in the end be more beneficial. Benoit mentions, “although equine science is improving every day and new technologies and methods are being invented, paying closer attention to the horse, just simply as a horse is of the utmost importance.” All veterinarians can uncover irregularities in the body of a horse. If the irregularities have not affected them in the past, only time will tell if they will affect them in the future. A pre-purchase examination only gives insight into the problems, but proper maintenance of a horse manages these irregularities. As equine science continues to improve, perhaps pre-purchase examinations will decrease in frequency as sufficient maintenance of a horse can prevent issues in health from arising.

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