

So what about Thoroughbreds for dressage?

Thoroughbreds are wonderful. Thoroughbreds are crap. And as someone's culturally insensitive grandfather once said, "All Chinamen look alike." So let's agree at the outset that generalizations are only moderately worthwhile at best, particularly when they are applied to a sample of one—namely the thoroughbred you may or may not be buying.

I've ridden hundreds of TBs over the years and shown plenty of them—as hunters, as jumpers, event horses, and dressage horses all the way through into the FEI levels. I have several students who, with diligence, brought their TBs all the way to the Grand Prix.

I knew one TB who was totally nuts on the track. He was known for running off with every single exercise boy and having to be fetched back by the outrider on a routine basis. The day he walked off the van to begin his new life with us, it was like one curtain came down and another was raised. He could do walk-trot lessons a few weeks later.

I rode another TB—a stallion—with impeccable bloodlines: Bold Ruler on his top side, Tom Fool on his mother's side. He was so laid back that we could actually use him as a jump standard, resting a pole on his butt as kids rode their ponies down the gymnastic which he formed a part of.

And I've met TBs who, given every chance to forget their past and start over, could just never dig themselves out of the hole that the racetrack had put in their minds.

As I mentioned, it's hard to generalize. For every point I'm about to make, someone will have an exception to bring up. We must also make a distinction between homebred, family raised TBs and ones who've had to endure the racetrack meat grinder. Even if an ex-racehorse will let you get on and ride him around, it's not at all rare for it to take a year and a half (or more) to get his brain to function like a normal one where suppleness, pliability, and calm are more than a wistful dream.

Aside from that, TBs tend to be a little thinner-skinned and a bit quicker to react than some other types. If you lack confidence, if your seat isn't secure yet, if your balance isn't very good, there are probably other breeds that would better suit your situation.

If you have loads of patience and have a fairly light touch, thoroughbreds can be very rewarding and a lot of fun. Remember that, as with any horse you might pick for competition or training, the purity of his gaits, the looseness and freedom of his movement, and an uphill way of going will all make your job far easier than if you begin with a bunch of strikes against you.

Under what circumstances would I want to use a running martingale?