

Issue One

THE

2024

ICELANDIC HORSE

Q U A R T E R L Y



Official Publication of the United States Icelandic Horse Congress
Member Association of FEIF (International Federation of Icelandic Horse Associations)

THE HAND-PICKED HORSE

by Jennifer Bechard

"I'd been thinking about him for a while. All it took was going on a quest to find him."

When it came to purchasing a new horse, Chris Willrodt's initial criteria seemed quite reasonable: A reliable gelding. Between five and eight years old. At least 145 centimeters tall. Natural tölter. Well-balanced gaits. Commendable work ethic (providing energy as needed, but also capable of relaxing promptly upon request). A friendly nature toward other horses.

However, as discussions continued between her and her trainer, Alicia Flanigan, the list expanded significantly. Her "would-likes" turned into "must-haves," and the search became daunting. Now, the ideal horse must not only meet the specified criteria, but also be chestnut, exhibit exceptional conformation, boast a flaxen mane and tail, showcase advanced training relative to its age, be proficient in all five gaits, and demonstrate a wide speed range in tölt.

Daunting search aside, Chris was confident that Alicia would find the horse and that the match would be perfect. Fire & Ice Icelandic Horses, Alicia's secluded farm in Limington, Maine, is home to five



Chris Willrodt had a long list of "must-haves" and "would-likes" when she sent Alicia Flanigan to Iceland to find her dream horse. All photos by Jennifer Bechard.

of her personal Icelandic horses. But it is also a special place for Icelandic horses and their riders from across the region. From the spotless barn and well-footed

outdoor arena, to the beautiful trails through the surrounding forests, it's an ideal place for Alicia's talents to shine, as she helps her clients realize their Icelandic horse dreams.

Alicia spends part of each year living and working in Mosfellsbær, Iceland. While in Maine she provides training, clinics, and lessons; when she is in Iceland she focuses on competing and advancing her own education as a trainer, in preparation for attending the equestrian program at Hólar University. Last year marked a significant achievement for Alicia, as she not only qualified for but also competed in the Icelandic Championships, as the sole American representative. Proudly representing the US, Alicia achieved commendable total scores ranging from 6.4 to 6.8. When asked to talk about her accomplishments, Alicia remains remarkably humble, emphasizing her passion for Icelandic horses and the joy of contributing to their community, both in the US and abroad. She's much more interested in talking about Chris's quest for the perfect horse.



Chris and Heimir frá Dallandi getting to know each other at Alicia Flanigan's Fire & Ice Icelandics in Limington, Maine.

THE QUEST

Chris has owned Icelandic horses for 18 years, but as a former endurance rider, she's ridden thousands of miles over her lifetime. After her move from California to Maine in 2020, she connected with Alicia for lessons and training for her two Icelandic horses, Sólfari and Andvari, and eventually enlisted the young professional's help to find her lifelong dream horse.

Alicia reflected on their journey together. "Chris and I have been working closely together for about three years, after our first time meeting at a clinic I was teaching in Maine. I've not only been providing lessons and training, but also taking care of her two Icelandic geldings, Sólfari and Andvari, offering them tune-ups along the way. Over time, I've gotten to know Chris well, both as a person and a rider.

"The moment arrived when Chris decided to search for a new horse, one that would ideally become her lifelong riding companion. We spent months discussing her preferences and creating a detailed list of criteria. Her requirements, ranging from age and size to appearance and temperament, were quite specific. Similarly, I had my own set of criteria, including



Heimir and Chris with trainer Alicia (center).



What makes a perfect horse? It depends.

training level and gaits, which I believed were ideal for her riding needs.

"When I returned to Iceland, I started reaching out to my contacts at reputable farms. My job in this process was to find her the right horse and to make the match. This meant scouring Iceland for options. I tried numerous horses and then narrowed it down to only the horses that checked off all of the necessary criteria for Chris to try them herself.

"Within that list, I had my personal pick," Alicia added, "however, I kept that to myself to remain neutral. When Chris came to Iceland to look at and try each of the horses, all that she would know was that the horse met her criteria. She could go fully on feel and decide which horse she liked the most and gave her the best feeling, knowing that every horse was within the strict criteria and budget she had given me."

MAKING THE MATCH

"As Chris's trip to Iceland approached," Alicia continued, "I scheduled trials with several farms, but we didn't get past the second horse on my list."

Horse #2 was Heimir frá Dallandi. "I had seen a clip of him online," Alicia said, "a couple months prior to when I was going back to Iceland. Despite the

time frame, I reached out, and from all the information generously provided, he sounded like a good potential fit. I explained to the trainer at Dalland that I understood that the horse would most likely be sold by the time we could come to Iceland. However, I appreciated their time and information, and they said to simply be in touch, as there was a possibility he could still be available by that time. Turns out, when I got back to Iceland he was still available, and I did go to try him. Immediately, he checked off all of the criteria, and I just knew he was the perfect horse. But Chris's trip to Iceland was still a few weeks out, so I scheduled trials on all of the horses in the lineup."

At Dalland, Chris was able to try Heimir both inside and outside. "When she came back from her rides, all that we discussed was sending him for a vet check, which I helped to facilitate," Alicia said. "Then, of course, we canceled the rest of our horse-trying appointments for the next two days. Instead, I suggested she take lessons on her new horse with his current trainer at Dalland to get to know him better and also to learn his training cues to set them off on the right foot.

"Chris had the dream of enjoying this horse over the summer in his homeland



Alicia watches as Chris tries Heimir's slow tölt.



Chris and Alicia gave Heimir plenty of time to acclimate to his new home.

in beautiful Iceland. So, she opted to send Heimir to the farm where I was training over the summer. It made for some beautiful memories and fantastic rides.

“In the fall, I handled lining up the importation for Heimir. It was a sweet moment passing him off to the export company, as I knew the first leg of his life’s journey was starting. He flew over to the US, was quarantined with all the other imports at JFK airport, and then was hauled up to Maine. I assisted in talking Chris through how to slowly introduce him to his new world. They spent quality time together in the fields, bonding in the paddock while allowing him to check out his new environment, which is completely different than anything he was used to. Slowly but surely, after enough time of acclimation, he was able to get shoes on, and they were able to start riding together on US soil.

“Shortly after his arrival in the US, I made my way back to Maine as well. The new couple came to my farm to continue learning with me, ensuring that Heimir was adjusting properly, and that they were understanding each other under saddle. It also involved making sure everything was going smoothly and on the right track.

“It’s a wonderful feeling to make matches like this,” Alicia said, “and to

help clients find their dream horses. It’s not just about selling horses; it’s about finding people the horse that they are looking for and that is the right fit for them. But for this process to have worked out, it took dedication on both Chris’s and my end. Chris needed to be patient and willing to put the time into coming over to Iceland and trying these horses.

“It’s just as important that I, as the trainer, helped her verbalize what qualities she was looking for in a horse, as terms such as ‘willingness’ can be confusing and often misunderstood. It’s important to have a good understanding between the horse shopper and the one being shopped for, ensuring that we are both on the same page.”

THE PERFECT HORSE

“Since the first time I tried him,” Alicia concluded, “there’s never been a second of doubt in my mind that Heimir is the perfect horse for Chris. It’s a joy to see that proven true every day, and I wish them many happy miles and adventures together. It is my true passion to ride, train, and love this spectacular Icelandic



Alicia rides Heimir, ensuring that he is adjusting well to life in the US.



Alicia Flanigan and Heimir. “It’s a wonderful feeling to make matches like this,” Alicia says.

breed, and it is truly an honor to help others connect with them as well.”

Chris shared her personal feelings upon Heimir’s arrival in a post on the internet. Says Alicia, “Reading Chris’s post fills me with happiness, knowing that she now owns the horse she had dreamed of and that she is experiencing the exact emotions I hoped to share with her. Witnessing these meaningful connections come to life is genuinely magical.”

Chris wrote: “Ever since Heimir arrived, I’ve had a lasting inner peace. I’d been thinking about him for a while. All it took was going on a quest to find him. I had a clear picture in my mind of many qualities, including his chestnut color and silver in his mane and tail.

“Let me introduce you to Heimir frá Dallandi, my new eight-year-old Icelandic, imported from Iceland with the help of my trainer, Alicia Flanigan. Her deep knowledge of the Icelandic breed made him a perfect match for me and Sólfari. In his first few days here, Heimir was restless, often looking eastward—toward his homeland, maybe? Now, five weeks later, we’ve settled into a routine. He grazes for about two and a half hours in the early morning, perfect for watching sunrises. When I bring him in, we walk together without a lead or treats, making turns and stops, new liberty skills we’ve been learning together.

“My first ride on him felt exceptional. These initial weeks have been like a honeymoon with pleasant surprises. During one trail ride, I wondered how he’d react if he saw a deer. A few minutes later, a deer bounded in front of us, and he stood tall, watching intently. He’s the best teacher; he already knows. Now I can ride one horse and lead the other, switching saddles and horses seamlessly. They get along and groom each other when they graze. Heimir has a way of switching his energy on—proud and high-stepping, with clear and rhythmic gaits. Changing speed is effortless, thanks to his excellent training and conformation. And then, he can settle down. It’s such a relief to have him here. My search is over.”

STEPS TO FINDING THE PERFECT MATCH

by Alicia Flanigan

Know Your Client: The foundation of this journey lies in understanding the client, knowing what they want to use the horse for, and considering their horse knowledge and background based on their skill level.

Understand the Client’s Needs: It’s crucial to know the client’s needs in their equine partner. This involves being honest with oneself and the client about capabilities and expectations.

Create Criteria Lists: Working with clients to create a detailed list of criteria, addressing both personal preferences and my professional considerations. The criteria list becomes the guiding principle in my search for a horse.

Create Wish Lists: Clients are encouraged to create lists of “would like” features, such as size, gaits, age, temperament, and colors.

Establish Clear Communication: Both parties need to have a clear understanding of elements such as movement, temperament, willingness level, and other specific qualities. Clear communication between the rider, trainer, and buyer is essential.

Scout Out Potential Fits: After gaining a good feel for the client’s needs, I scout out reputable farms in search of potential matches. I consider various factors, such as age, size, appearance, temperament, and training level.

Implement an Unbiased Selection Process: Every horse on the list goes through an unbiased selection process to ensure it fits the criteria before my client ever sits on them. This ensures objectivity in the decision-making process.

Try Horses Personally: To ensure the horse meets my exacting standards, I personally try out potential matches. From this, I create a list of horses that fit the criteria.

Assist with Vet Checks and the Import Process: Once I find a potential match, my mother, Nikkisue Flanigan, and I collaborate to arrange the horse’s vet check and manage the export/import process. This includes aiding in the often stressful task of importing horses, particularly for first-time buyers. Our combined expertise ensures a smooth process, working seamlessly together to make it all happen.

Advise on the Acclimation Process: I actively participate in the acclimation process as the horse transitions into the US. This includes helping the horse and rider establish a strong bond, ensuring they begin on the right foot in their new environment.

Make Matches, Not Sales: My goal is not just to sell a horse, but to make a meaningful match. Experiencing the heartwarming stories of my clients and the joy their horses bring them, witnessing the bonding process upon arrival, and observing those initial steps under saddle after the acclimation period is truly special for me.