

## **Trailer Horses: Hauling and Unloading**

Our topics for this week are:

- Hauling horses in trailers
- Unloading horses from trailers
- Pre-trip checks and trailer maintenance
- Air travel for horses

### **Traveling**

Prior to traveling, a driver hauling horses should plan a route, check the weather, and ensure proper paperwork is ready. Travel in the first 2 hours should be especially careful. After 2 hours, the horses should be checked and rechecked every 4 hours of travel afterwards. Every 4 hours the horses should have at least 30 minutes of trailer rest at a stop. Trailering is particularly tiring on horses since they stand the entire time. Constant balancing and bracing with the start, stops, and sways of the trailer can be exhausting. At least one night of rest should be provided after each 8 hours of trailering. Signs of discomfort in the horses can include restlessness, sweating or trembling, or lying down. Drivers should keep their own rest stops as short as possible while the horses are still trailered.

In preparation for hauling horses, drivers should practice towing and backing the trailer. They must stay alert and avoid driving if tired, injured, or on medications that adversely affect their ability to remain alert or decrease their reaction time.

The lead rope should be tied with enough slack to permit the horse to balance itself while being towed and reduce the risk of claustrophobia. A breakaway halter or tie ring that permits sliding (Blocker tie ring) should be used to inhibit the horse from lowering its head during a normal trip but still permit it to free its head if in a trailer accident. A cotton lead rope should be used for tying in a trailer.

For trips lasting more than 3 hours, a horse must be able to lower its head. Respiratory secretions are not properly cleared if horses cannot lower their head below the height of their withers within 6 hours. Accumulated mucus and other secretions can then become media for bacterial growth.

Floor mats increase traction, reduce noise, and road heat. For short distance trips, only the rubber mats are sufficient. Bedding on top of the mats is desirable for longer (more than 2 hours) trips when horses are more likely to urinate in the trailer. Because bedding can reduce the air quality, only low dust, pine, large flake, shavings should be used. Trailer stall dividers should not go to floor so an adult horse has more room to balance itself. However, if there is a possibility of a foal going under or being thrown underneath a divider, the bottom of the divider should be blocked.

No feed is needed during short trips of less than 3 hours. Feeding should be done 3 or more hours prior to travel and grass hay provided every 2 to 4 hours to maintain normal gastrointestinal activity. Dust is reduced if fed in a trailer with manger and wetted hay cubes are used.

Stops should occur at least every 4 hours to allow horses to drink and if possible, eat

grass. Some horses will not drink water that is not from its home. Water should be provided in a familiar bucket. Adding peppermint oil to the horse's water at home and later to water from other sources may induce them to drink water that is not from home. Colic can occur because of reluctance to drink adequately during travel.

Stallions and geldings stretch backwards and spread their hind legs to urinate and many will not urinate in a trailer. Stops every 200 miles or 4 hours may be necessary to prevent urine retention. It is important to stop in places away from traffic where the horse can walk around, graze, urinate, and defecate before resuming travel.

Blankets should be avoided in most cases to reduce the risk of overheating. However in cold weather, the trailer should still be well ventilated. This may necessitate blanketing horses, especially in stock (open) trailers. If hauling in a stock trailer or a horse trailer with windows that will be open for ventilation in warm weather, horses should wear fly masks to protect their eyes from flying insects and debris in the trailer, particularly loose bedding materials.

Proper driving while hauling horses in a trailer takes practice, otherwise a horse can be thrown off its feet with fast starts, sudden turns, or quick stops. To test a driver's skills, a bucket of water can be placed in an empty trailer that will be hauled to determine if a driver can pull a trailer without spilling the water bucket. Drivers must always remember that extra room is needed to stop when hauling a trailer with horses. The normal distance between the towing vehicle and a vehicle ahead of it should be doubled when hauling a horse trailer. Safe driving becomes even more important when hauling horses in adverse weather conditions. Distractions, as the use of cell phones, should be strictly avoided while towing a horse trailer. Smoking materials should never be thrown from the towing vehicle. Lit cigarettes or matches can be sucked into the horse trailer and cause a trailer fire.

If an emergency stop becomes necessary, horses should not be unloaded next to a highway. An off-road area away from the highway should be sought and unloading done only if necessary. Emergency flashers should be turned on. If pulling off the roadway is not an option, flares or flashing lights should be placed 20, 50, 100, 200, and 300 feet behind the trailer. If flares or lights are not available, other people should be enlisted to alert motorists. Two spare tires should be carried due to the frequent occurrence of two flats at the same time on horse trailers.

A Limited Power of Attorney for Animal Health Care document should be kept in the towing vehicle to direct emergency responders who have legal authority to make decisions on treatment of the horses if the owner is injured in an accident while pulling horses in a trailer. Free forms are available at [www.usrider.org](http://www.usrider.org). USRider is an equestrian motor plan that provides roadside assistance and towing services for the vehicle and horses.

## **Unloading**

Unloading can be the most dangerous aspect of hauling horses. The lead rope should be untied before releasing the butt bar or chain or opening the back door of the trailer. Untying must be done without entering trailer with the horse. Untying horses in stock trailers can be done from outside the trailer. Other trailers may allow the handler to get to the tie ring from a window, a front compartment, or an empty stall adjacent to the horse to be untied. Horses should be trained to wait a couple of minutes after being untied until given permission to come out. After the horse is untied, the handler should open the back door and release the butt bar or chain and go into the trailer and pet the horse briefly for standing still and then ask it to quietly back up.

Before backing a horse out of a trailer, there should have been prior assurance that the trailer cannot move and that the doors are secured open and unable to move with a wind gust. If the horse rushes back, a handler could get caught in the thrashing. Rushing back is unacceptable and indicates the need for more trailing in loading and unloading for the horse.

After the horse is unloaded, care should be taken if tying to the trailer. Ties near door latches that may catch a lead rope or wheel wells where a pawing hoof might get caught should be avoided. Horses should never be tied to an unhitched trailer. A scared horse can pull a trailer and cause great damage to itself and anything around it.

### **Trailer Check, Maintenance, and Towing**

Safer trailering requires proper trailer and towing vehicle maintenance. Drivers need to comply with the towing vehicle's manufacturer maintenance schedule. Towing weights should not exceed 85% of the towing vehicle's maximum towing capacity. The vehicle should have a factory-equipped or after factory-added towing package. Towing packages typically include oversized battery, high output alternator, wiring harness for the trailer, heavier brakes and suspension, transmission oil cooler, oversized radiator and high-capacity water pump, and an axle ratio that is geared for towing. Oversized extendable side mirrors are also helpful.

Most states do not require yearly safety inspections of horse trailers, but wheel bearings should be repacked every 12 months or 12,000 miles. A annual inspection should include the wiring, brakes, and emergency breakaway cable, pin, and control box. Horse trailers are required to have emergency breakaway system to activate the trailer brakes if the trailer comes uncoupled from the truck during travel. The trailer battery that activates the trailer brakes in an emergency should be rechecked at least once per year.

Oak planks are best for flooring covered by non-slip rubber mats. Low dust bedding should be used in areas where the horses may urinate to prevent splashing and encourage elimination. At least once per year, wood floorboards should be checked for rot or aluminum floorboards checked for weakening from oxidation. Floor mats should be removed when washing the interior and left out until the flooring is dry.

Tires should have at least 1/4 inch of tread. Consider replacing trailer tires at 6 years, regardless of the extent of wear. Tire failure is a leading cause for serious trailer accidents. Tires for trailers are different than for trucks. The load rating for most trailers is at least "D", i.e., an 8 ply tire designed ST (stiff sidewalls) to prevent sway and carry heavy loads. Drum brakes should be adjusted every 5,000 miles.

A maintenance checklist should be reviewed prior to each trip.

1. Check tire tread, tire pressures, vehicle and trailer lights, brakes, and floor of the trailer.
2. Check interior for sharp edges, protruding nuts or bolts, wasp or rodent nests, and spoiled feed.
3. Open vents, but do not open drop-down windows if horses could stick their head out during travel.
4. Clean and inspect flooring after each haul.
5. Inspect all fluid levels in towing vehicle.
6. Lubricate the trailer ball and check it for tightness and check coupler on trailer for proper operation and an effective locking mechanism. After hooking up the

trailer, make sure the hitch is properly attached and locked in place, the safety chains are crossed underneath the hitch and attached to the towing vehicle properly, and the breakaway emergency stop cable is attached.

7. Pull the trailer empty and check the brakes on the towing vehicle and the trailer.
8. Load emergency materials for people and horses: first aid kits, A-B-C rated fire extinguisher, blankets, and drinking water.
9. Load emergency tools: flashlight and spare batteries, jumper cables, duct tape, extra halters and lead ropes, spare vehicle bulbs and fuses, crowbar, pliers, screwdrivers, wrenches, hammer, traction devices in winter, properly inflated truck and trailer spare tires, vehicle jacks, lug-nut wrenches, 3 emergency reflective triangles, and 4 tire chocks.
10. Load hygiene tools: broom, shovel, manure fork, bucket, and sponges.
11. Secure all tack and supplies to prevent slipping, sliding, or rolling around during travel.
12. Carry legal and emergency paperwork: registration papers and titles for the truck and trailer, emergency veterinary contact information, Limited Power of Attorney for Animal Health Care document, veterinary health certificates (Certificate of Veterinary Inspection) if crossing state lines, Coggins test papers, and if needed, a brand inspection certificate.

### **Trailer Turnover Accident**

If confronted with a trailer turnover accident with entrapped live horses, approach the trailer slowly to minimize the risk of inciting struggling. Set up a perimeter containment when a horse becomes free. If horse cannot stand because its head is tied fast, tape a knife to a pole to cut the lead rope. Do not climb or reach into the trailer.

### **Pickup Beds**

Most domestic ranch and farm animals can be transported in appropriately prepared pickup beds, including horses. Pickup beds can be floored with mats to improve footing and outfitted with a rack on all four sides that are withers height or higher. Seasoned ranch horses can be trained to jump into pickup beds. Transporting them in a pickup bed avoids the expense of trailer, the time involved in hooking and unhooking a trailer, and the difficulty of backing and parking a trailer.

However, routinely transporting a horse in a pickup is inadvisable due to the risks of the vehicle being top-heavy, increasing the risk of tip-over. The horse is also put at risk of eye injuries, especially if not tied to face backward to the cab or wears a fly mask. Plus, there is no overhead shelter from sun, rain, and hail.

### **Air Travel**

Horses have been transported in airplanes for more than 70 years. At least 5 hours should be allowed for a horse to rest before it is loaded onto an air transport plane. Travel containers are similar to a small box stall. The horse is usually cross-tied.

Grain should not be fed immediately before, during, or immediately after flying. A handler needs to stay with the horse during takeoff, turbulence, and landings. Hay should be available and water offered every 1 to 2 hours. There should be at least one groom for every 3 horses. Chemical restraint is inadvisable since it could affect the horse's ability to balance itself

during flight.

The horses should wear only a halter. Leg wraps are avoided since they can come loose during flight and are unsafe to reapply while in flight. Blankets, boots, and head bumpers can cause the horse to overheat. At least one night of rest should be provided after each 2 hours of air travel.

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Horses should be checked in the first 2 hours and every 4 hours afterward when being trailered.**
- 2. Providing trailer bedding should be considered if trips are more than 2 hours long.**
- 3. Horses should be taught not to unload until the handler asks them to move.**
- 4. Horses should only wear a halter when transported by airplane.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine food supply sources.

Additional information is available at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com)

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.