

Loading Horses in Trailers

Our topics for this week are:

- Transporting horses by trailers
- Loading horses into trailers

TRANSPORTING HORSES

Ground Transport

Trailers and vans should be road worthy and of sufficient size for the horses to be hauled. Most trailers are 7 feet tall from floor to ceiling which will accommodate horses up to 16 hands in height. Taller horses require taller trailers. Ventilation is important even in winter. Closed trailers should have at least 1 overhead vent per horse. There should be no protrusions or sharp edges inside the trailer or van. Flooring should be non-slip.

Many horses are trailered for the first time when being taken to a veterinary clinic or hospital because of illness or injury. This is too late. Forcing the horse into a trailer (called a “float” in Australia and New Zealand) or a horse van (“horsebox” in Britain) is a set back for training the horse to load properly and is an unsafe situation for handlers. Loading and unloading horses from a trailer is one of the most potentially dangerous activities of a horse handler. Much of the danger can be mitigated by early training, routine practice, thorough preparation of the trailer and towing equipment, and careful driving.

Loading

Horses should be trained to be hauled and receive periodic practice as reminders. Before horses can be loaded and unloaded from a trailer, they need to be able to walk on a wooden platform to experience stepping up, hearing the hollow sound made on a plank floor, and backing up and stepping down. Step-up entries are sufficient for small trailers. Large trailers may have a much higher flooring level and require ramps for loading. Ramps should not be more than a 25 degree grade of incline. Distractions, especially dogs, should be removed from the loading area.

Loading and unloading is safer with two people involved. A cotton or leather lead rope is best for trailering. Nylon lead ropes can burn the hands if the horse rushes backwards. The handler should never be positioned with the horse between him and the only exit while loading. There should be direct access to a front exit, the handler should stand on the other side of a divider, or the horse should be taught to be sent in rather than led into the trailer. The lead rope should be tied by reaching into the trailer from outside or there should be direct access to a front exit.

Some handlers run a lead rope around a tie ring or other stationary structure inside the trailer and will attempt to pull the horse toward the trailer and hold it, then pull it closer and hold it, and continue until the horse loads. However, pulling and holding forcing the horse to hold its feet still while pulling back usually intensifies fear of trailer loading. A better method involves allowing a horse to move its feet by longeing it near the trailer. The handler sends the horse on

the longe line toward the trailer. He then lowers his energy allowing the horse to become more relaxed whenever he investigates the trailer and remains still. This process is repeated until the horse willingly enters and stays still in the trailer. This is a training process that should be done in short increments over several days. No reprimands, such as sharp jerks on the lead rope, should ever occur in a trailer. Nothing that might cause fear or pain should ever occur in a trailer. Food rewards are not recommended. Food treats are not always available when horses need to be loaded. In emergencies such as barn fires, food may not be readily available.

With straight load trailers, the most weight should be distributed on the left side of the trailer for stability, i.e., a single horse goes on the left side, or if there are two horses, the heaviest goes on the left side. Having most of the weight on the side closest to the center of the road reduces the risk of the trailer tipping during left turns into a lane that is slanted to the road's shoulder. It also can ease getting a trailer back onto the road if the right tires drop off the pavement for some reason. Slant load trailers eliminate much of the instability of straight load trailers, shorten the length of trailers, and allow horses to better maintain their balance when the trailer goes around curves. There is more room in the back stall of slant load trailers, so the largest horse should be loaded last.

The horses should be loaded last, after everything else has been loaded. They should not have to wait after being loaded. The trailer needs to be attached to the tow vehicle and tires chocked so that it is immovable prior to the horse loading. The trailer's interior should be as bright as possible. Trailer doors should be tied back or otherwise secured so that they cannot be blown open or closed by wind. In warm weather, the driver should check for wasp nests in trailer corners, wheel wells, behind bumpers, in storage compartments, windows, and the trailer tongue. Also, any old feed that may have been left from a previous trip must be cleaned up in case it has become moldy. A handler should use his hands to check surfaces for sharp or rough areas and not just visually inspect the surfaces.

The best method of leading into a trailer requires many training exercises and occasional refresher sessions. Horses should be trained to load without being led in. The handler should never stand in a trailer in front of a horse and attempt to get it to load. If it does decide to enter, it could jump into him. Horses not trained for trailer loading can be encouraged by a lasso around their rear, a person waving their arms or a broom behind them, or tapping on the top of the rump with a long whip. However, just making noise by rhythmically slapping leather chaps or something similar is often more effective. Watching and following a seasoned horse that loads well aids loading horses new to trailers. This should be done during the handling of nursing foals by following their mother into a trailer.

After the horse enters the trailer, the butt bar or chain should be secured before tying the halter lead. The handler who secures the bar or chain should not stand directly behind the horse in case the horse suddenly tries a hasty exit. Past the age of weaning, horses in trailers should be haltered and tied. The lead rope should be tied with a quick release hitch, a Blocker tie ring, or a panic snap to free a horse quickly, if needed. Tying horses should be done through a window from the outside after they are loaded. They should be tied loose enough that they may brace themselves against the back or side of a trailer. Tying in a trailer should be loose enough for the horse to move to keep its balance during travel and short enough to prevent it from stepping over the lead rope and becoming entangled. Foals or other horses that have not been halter broke should not be tied. The untied horse should be blocked off with a divider or gate and a trained and seasoned horse tied in the back of the trailer.

If trailering a reluctant horse, a stock trailer should be used for more ventilation and visibility, so that it has a less enclosed feeling. Either interior lights should be turned on or the trailer parked so the sun shines into the trailer. A calm herd mate should be loaded first. A horse should never be tranquilized before hauling due to risk of it being injured by an inability to keep its balance.

Protective equipment may be used if needed, including leg wraps, bell boots, head bumpers, tail wraps, and blankets. Leg wraps may or may not be helpful. Some horses will not tolerate them, persistently stomping their feet and will develop bowed tendons. Leg wraps can also get too hot in warm weather. However, if in a turnover accident, horses fight to regain a standing position and then they will quiet down. Injuries often occur to legs in the effort to stand and may be reduced if a horse is wearing leg wraps.

Horses should not be hauled while wearing tack. In addition to the damage that can occur to the saddle, saddle blankets and saddles can increase the risk of the horse overheating and having more serious injuries in a vehicular accident.

Use of a rump rope or two handlers grasping each other's wrists behind the horse's rump to force loading can increase the risk of the horse rearing. If using a rope around the horse's rump, about 2/3 of the pressure to move should be applied to the rump rope and 1/3 to the halter's lead rope. Long ropes can be tied to each side of a trailer and crossed behind horse and held by two assistants to aid loading a reluctant horse. If these techniques are used, the handler with the lead rope should use an extra long lead rope for safety if the horse rears. Two handlers grasping each other's wrists prevents rope burns to the horse and sideways evasions to loading. Use of a blindfold or backing the horse onto the trailer increases the risk of the horse jumping into or onto the handler.

Nursing foals should always travel with their dam. If other horses will travel with mare and foal, the mare and foal should be in a compartment separated from other horses.

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

- 1. Attempting to load an unwilling horse into a trailer can be dangerous.**
- 2. Horses should be gradually and quietly trained to load in trailers and routinely rehearsed.**
- 3. Adult horses should be tied by their lead rope and halter during travel in trailers.**
- 4. Hauling horses in trailers with tack on is not advised.**
- 5. Mares and foals should be trailered together, but separate from other horses.**

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 book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: 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.