

The Challenge of Trailer Loading

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If there is one topic with horses that seems to have had a fair amount of coverage but still is a serious hurdle for so many people, trailer loading. We all have to move our horses from one place to another for veterinary attention, pleasure trail riding, show or from one boarding facility to another sooner than later. At clinics, if I had to choose the best test of Leadership for participants, I would choose trailer loading. When people try to lead their horses into trailers it becomes clear that not too many have receptive followers. Such a claustrophobic test (horses are phobic of small spaces, never mind ones that move) soon illustrates who is leading who.

I will focus this discussion on what we can do to make the experience of trailer loading more positive for everyone. Whatever techniques we apply has to be practiced in horse terms. This means practicing one step at a time anywhere from 50-1000 times depending on the quality of your lead and your horse's anxiety level. This amount is only counting the positive tries and not the evasive ones, especially the ones defying your lead.

My preference for teaching a horse to load is a side-by-side two-horse trailer. I like to teach the horse to load itself and not have the leader in the way in case the horse wants out. Although this is more challenging to do correctly, it is safer for both the horse and leader. Also, in driving a horse into the trailer, this tells you exactly how the horse feels about it and it will have to be done in smaller steps to succeed. It is not so important to go forward but to be able to back out of the trailer safely, one step at a time. Some horses are rushed and may load but then lose it when they are asked to back out of the trailer because they freeze or explode in their panic to get out.

Here are some suggestions on how to succeed safely.

Safe trailer

- No sharp points at the entrance
- Only one slot open to load the horse
- Not too high a step
- If there is a ramp, have no sharp edges, not slippery or too steep
- An arena type footing around the trailer with some space
- A round pen or small arena works great
- Safe preparation leads to a safe execution

Good Equipment

- 12-foot lead line
- Halter (boat rope lead and horseman's halter)
- 5-foot buggy whip

Teach your horse

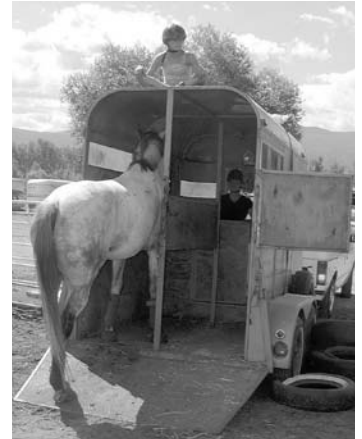
- To back-up to a tap on its chest, vibration of lead line or verbal cue. Develop a strong conditioned response. The horse has to be very good at this, as it will push into pressure when it becomes anxious, the reflex it was born with.
- Make sure your horse has a good response to turning on its haunches otherwise when it panics, you will not be able to keep it from being evasive and walking over you when you are at the side of the trailer berth. When a horse is being evasive, going sideways is easier than going backwards.

Practice driving your horse forward

- From beside you, to in front of you away from the trailer.
 - Practice driving up onto boxes, pallets, pedestals and over tarps.
 - Incorporate backing up skills off obstacles.
 - Control the feet.
 - Use your whip to assist you so the horse understands the touch of the whip.
 - Any tool you use should be an extension of you. The energy in the tool changes with what you imply, energy and direction when asking and soft, slow and relaxed when petting with it.
 - The more meaningful touches a horse receives, the faster it learns.
- ## Strong relaxation cues
- The horse should have head down cues and know how to bend on a circle and release the poll (if you are not familiar with this please contact the editor for past TFC articles on these topics).
 - Once we can drive a horse, approach the berth of the trailer. The leader stands to the side of the entrance drawing the horse forward until it approaches.
 - Tap the lower back leg of the horse with a whip until it makes an attempt to go forward. If the horse does not respond, the intensity of the tap escalates.
 - Any time the horse attempts to move forward, stop tapping and relax.
 - If the eye of the horse is on the trailer, then the rest of the body will follow. If this is difficult for the horse, take the horse away from the trailer in a short walk to reward and release pressure. Return and repeat.



Acacia loading Misty



Loading with Liss on top



Loading with a bag of cans on top

Trailer Loading, cont'd

- Keep asking the horse to go forward. If it leans back hold until it settles a bit and then resume tapping to go forward. If the horse fusses and becomes scared adding more pressure is not a good thing.
- Should the horse want to escape in strong protest, you might take its idea of moving away from the trailer and make it yours. Do so by moving it backward away from the trailer. Keep going backward in an arc until you are back near the trailer and then immediately, calmly set-up to load again.
- If the horse keeps resisting, keep the motivational activity going longer and longer. Loading in the trailer has to be the easiest thing or the "best deal in town" otherwise the horse will choose everything else.
- Only stop when the horse attempts what you have asked. Stopping any other time will reward the resistance and make it more difficult to progress later.

When the horse enters the trailer

- Do not get into a tug of war trying to hold the horse if it wants to back out.
- A horse at the berth feeling trapped will want to throw its head up and back or bolt.
- If you resist too strongly it will go up and bang its head. Guess who is hanging onto the line and gets blamed for the pain?
- If the horse wants to back out allow it, slow it down until it stops outside of the trailer, then ask it right back in. If the horse doesn't feel you are forcing it to stay inside, persistently insist it try to go inside and stay. It will start to see it your way if it realizes it is not trapped.
- When the horse pauses part way inside, back it up before it starts to feel too anxious. A real anxious horse forgets how to back out safely.
- Take a short walk away from the trailer for a few seconds and come back and repeat.

When the horse is in the trailer

- It might be useful to have some hay in there. Anything else may look like a bribe to the horse rather than just feeling good inside the trailer.
- A horse that chews is salivating and relaxing.

Tying

- So often people think because the horse goes into a trailer it knows how to load safely. Don't tie a horse until it understands tying, which is done away from a trailer (again please refer to past TFC articles).
- Tying and trailer loading are not complete until we have introduced some bomb proofing. It is guaranteed eventually something unsettling will happen. A tied, trapped horse is not a safe one unless it is well-prepared.
- When introducing, for example, banging on the trailer, do it so lightly and with rhythm.
- Should the horse back out, allow it and then ask it right back in once it realizes no harm came to it. How far you want to take this is up to you. I am satisfied when I can jump all over the trailer, bang some tin cans, burst balloons, have flapping tarps with the horse staying calm through this and not try to kill itself or destroy the trailer trying to escape just because another horse or itself passed some wind!

Loading well and safely

- The horse should be able to do this 100 to 1000 times.
- If you like more challenges, do it from a distance pointing to the trailer to load up. I like to use the cue word "load-up."
- If you like a horse with a tail cue to back out, just take the tail and pull on it backwards as you vibrate the line and say "back" when the horse first starts to enter part way at the beginning.
- Practice loading two horses at a time.

Prepare yourself and your horse to be successful

- If you are not sure your horse has it solid, do it more! Fewer than 100 successful completions is not solid! These sessions can be broken up in several days.
- Modify it to meet your abilities and time.
- A horse that can load or unload itself when you ask it too, not blow-up and self-destruct with reasonable commotion, will always be a better riding and driving horse, never mind being more fun and safer to be with.

confidence to perform creative movements or acts with Courage. For more information on training check the web site www.pkequestrian.com.

Paul Dufresne has an education background and has been training horses for over 20 years. His clinics and training are a blend of Natural Horsemanship/Classical-Circensic Dressage/Spanish Reining. His focus is on developing self-sufficient leadership that allows the horse to be a good follower, fostering