

Trailer Loading

by
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There is something about trailer loading that tends to be more frustrating than almost any other aspect of working with horses. Trailer loading also reveals how profusely creative people can be in their attempts to coerce a horse into action. Unfortunately, most methods used to force a horse into a trailer come with a real possibility of causing a wreck. The best way to load a horse is to make the trailer a good place. If your horse feels safe and comfortable in the trailer he will load.

Your timing doesn't have to be off very much for you to make loading more difficult than it needs to be for your horse. Trying to hurry the loading process is usually counter productive. If your horse is suspicious of the trailer at all, your efforts to encourage him to get in, often only serve to reinforce his idea that the trailer is not a good place to be. Carol's experience taking her horse Badger to Colorado State University's Veterinary Teaching Hospital (CSU) is a good example of this.

"I had an appointment at CSU for Badger to have some diagnostic tests done. Since I didn't have a trailer, my vet offered to haul my horse for me. Having previously had a bad experience with Badger in a trailer, I got professional help.

"The trainer I hired worked with Badger and me twice before the day my vet was to take Badger to CSU. Each session ended with me easily loading Badger by myself. The plan was for me to lead Badger up to my vet's trailer and let him check it out. I would then take Badger away and approach the trailer again. Our expectation, based on how Badger loaded during the training sessions, was that Badger would walk into the trailer on his own after the second or third approach.

"On the day of my appointment, I took Badger up to my vet's trailer and let him sniff. Without my prior knowledge or consent, the vet and the barn manager came up behind Badger and tried to push him in. Badger lurched forward and banged his shins on the edge of the trailer. After that, there was no getting Badger loaded. Things deteriorated to the point where I was pushed aside, the vet and barn manager were shoving and hitting Badger, while another person was in the trailer pulling with all his might, and the barn manager's dog was barking and nipping at Badger's heels. I put a stop to everything; I told them I didn't care if Badger ever went into a trailer, he could stay right there until he died, but no one was going to treat him the way they were.

"I called the trainer and asked for help. He agreed to haul Badger to CSU if I could get another appointment. Two weeks later, he arrived as I was bringing Badger out of the pasture. I handed Badger to the trainer and went to the tack room to get some things I needed. When I came out of the tack room, Badger was already standing quietly in the

trailer ready to go.

“I was surprised Badger had gotten into the trailer so quickly. I had done nothing with him since he refused to load two weeks before. When I asked the trainer what he had done to get Badger into the trailer, he said, ‘I let Badger sniff the trailer when we first walked up to it. While he was still interested in it, I took him away, and Badger walked right into the trailer on our second approach.’”

A good technique to temper your actions, so you don’t create resistance, is to try to get your horse better at loading each time you load him. Heather’s experience with a particularly difficult rescue horse is a good example of how much a horse can change with one good loading experience.

“I run a horse rescue and get a lot of interesting calls. One February several years ago, I got a call from someone who was moving out of town. Unable to load his horse, he told me he was donating her to my horse rescue. I got the address and asked a friend to go with me to get the horse.

“I don’t know what the horse’s owner had done to try to get his horse into the trailer, but we were unable to even get the horse to go near the trailer. I fed and watered the horse for several days while I found a family that said they would adopt the horse. They assured me they would be able to haul the horse in their trailer.

“On their first attempt to load the horse, they didn’t have any more luck than I did. They gave up, and said they would come back the next day with their vet and have her sedate the horse. With the mare sedated, they were sure loading her would not be a problem.

“Even with the horse sedated, they were unable to get her into their trailer. They tried every conceivable way. I finally put a stop to things, for fear the horse would get hurt, after the mare flipped over backwards several times. The vet suggested I contact a trainer she knew. She said if anyone could get this horse into a trailer, he could.

“I was a few minutes late and the trainer already had the mare standing quietly at the back of his trailer when I arrived. It still took several hours to get the mare to step into the trailer; she fought every request fiercely. The previous attempts to load this horse had convinced her that all of the usual loading techniques were threats on her life. Finally, the trainer found something he could use that no one had messed up he led the horse into the trailer with a rope on her front foot.

“A week later, the people who adopted this mare changed their minds. I called the trainer who loaded her before and asked if he could move the horse for me again. Expecting a repeat of the previous experience, I scheduled a time when he would have several hours to work on it. This time, however, things went quite differently the mare followed him right

into the trailer like she had loaded well all her life.”

Normal Loading Techniques

When you start loading your horse, expect one of the following scenarios to occur:

Your horse walks right in when you approach the trailer.

You drive your horse into the trailer.

You lead your horse into the trailer.

Your Horse Walks In

As you approach the trailer, watch for your horse to react. If your horse is concerned about being loaded into the trailer, you will need to find the edge of his comfort zone. This distance will be important if your horse does not get into the trailer right away. Make sure you are not blocking your horse's entrance to the trailer when you get there. You should be off to the side enough that your horse can walk right into the trailer if he chooses. Also, you need to feed the lead rope out as your horse gets into the trailer. Your horse will think you are asking him not to get into the trailer if he hits the end of the lead rope.

You Drive Your Horse In

If your horse does not walk into the trailer on his own, ask for a little more effort by driving him toward the trailer just as if you were driving him out on a circle around you. It is important here that you just ask for a try. You are not forcing your horse into the trailer at this point. As soon as your horse starts to try to get closer to the trailer, stop your driving and pet him. Think in terms of making the trailer a good, safe, quiet place to be. Your horse is already suspicious of the trailer. Putting pressure on him when he is trying to go in will reinforce your horse's idea that the trailer is not a good place.

After a few tries, give your horse a break by going to a spot past where he first reacted to the trailer. Pet your horse and let him relax with you. Spend a little time developing some communication but don't work your horse vigorously. By asking your horse to step back and lead up, move his hip over, move his shoulder over, and sending your horse past you out onto a circle, you will be developing tools you can use to maneuver your horse when you go back to the trailer.

When you are ready to try again, send your horse away from you and direct him as little as possible just enough to keep him headed for the trailer. Approach the trailer as before and give him the opportunity to walk in on his own. Follow this by asking for a little more effort and reward him for any interest shown in the trailer. Each time you take a break, go to the same spot. You want your horse to get the idea that there are two places to be with you at your spot, or in the trailer. If you are successful in convincing your horse that the trailer is a good place to be, he will eventually walk in on his own when you send him

away from your spot.

You Lead Your Horse In

In cases where the driving technique does not work, try leading your horse into the trailer. In a slant-load or stock trailer, there is enough room for you to step into the trailer and lead your horse in behind you. In a two-horse straight-load trailer, you will need to be in the stall opposite the one you are trying to get your horse into. From your position in the trailer, take the slack out of the lead rope and hold a steady pressure until your horse makes an effort to move toward the trailer. Just as in the driving technique, it is important that you put no pressure on your horse when he is moving toward the trailer; you want to reward every effort. If your horse makes no effort to come off your pressure, increase the pressure and/or move to the side a little so the pressure is not pulling straight forward. A good gauge of how much pressure you can use is how close your horse's head is to the roof of the trailer. The more pressure you use, the higher your horse will raise his head. Don't use so much pressure that your horse bumps his head on the roof of the trailer. If you hold a steady pressure and release whenever your horse makes an effort, he should eventually walk into the trailer.

When you lead a horse into a slant-load or stock trailer, you should stay on the left side of the trailer and bring your horse up on the right side. Do not let your horse turn away from you. Pull his head toward you if he starts to turn around. That will keep you on the inside of the turn so you can move to the right rear corner of the trailer to stay out of his way.

Setting Yourself up for Success

The larger, more open, light , and airy a trailer is the more likely it is that your horse will get in. Think of ways you can create more space in your trailer. Is there a rear tack compartment that can be removed? Can you take the dividers out? If you have a two horse side-by-side trailer, fastening the back of the divider to the wall on the right side will create a larger diagonal space for your horse.

Make sure the floor of your trailer is well supported. A horse will not want to get in a trailer if the floor sags too much. I have seen horses that previously refused to get into their owners trailers load easily once additional supports were welded under the floor.

Once you've done everything you can to make your trailer as inviting as possible, the following tips can be helpful in different situations:

Eliminate the step up. The one thing I have seen help the most in loading horses that have never been in a trailer before is to back up to a bank so the horse can walk in without having to step up. Anything you do to reduce the step will help, but eliminating the step altogether works the best.

Have hay in the trailer. I don't believe in bribing a horse into the trailer, but it is good

for the horse to find a reward when he does load up. For horses that are very food oriented, this can be a real incentive.

Use a combination of leading and driving. Simultaneously keeping pressure on the lead rope and tapping the horse's hind legs can elicit a try from the most reluctant horse. This should not be used as an attempt to force the horse into the trailer, but the tapping must be strong enough for the horse to want to get away from it. Stop tapping and release the pressure on the lead rope to reward each try. Keep in mind that too much pressure on the lead rope will cause the horse to resist your efforts.

Lead the horse by a front foot. Occasionally I'll run into a case where the horse thinks he must protect himself from all the normal methods of loading. When everything I try brings up the horse's self-preservation, I look for fresh ground to establish communication. Leading by a front foot will be new to most horses it won't be on their list of things they need to protect themselves from.

After you get your horse loaded, drive sensibly. Quick stops, fast starts, and hard cornering all make it difficult for your horse to keep his balance. Having to deal with the centrifugal force of a corner and acceleration or deceleration at the same time is even harder. Add to that the "whiplash" effect you get in a trailer, and you can easily cause your horse to lose his balance. If your horse is repeatedly thrown off balance every time he rides in your trailer, he will not want to get in the trailer when you ask.

If you accelerate gradually, leave plenty of room for stopping, and go slow through corners, you will make your horse's ride in the trailer more pleasant. Slow down before entering a turn and don't accelerate after the turn until the trailer is straight so you don't combine the effects of acceleration/deceleration with centrifugal force. You can also reduce the effects of cornering by how you use the road. Staying to the outside all the way around a corner increases the radius effect, straightening out the turn. On corners less than 90, you can increase the radius even more by starting into the corner on the outside, drifting to the inside at the apex, and back to the outside as you exit the turn all in one smooth arc.

Special Considerations in Difficult or Unusual Situations

Whenever several people are working together, coordination between handlers is extremely important. It is essential that conflicting signals are not given to your horse and that releases are consistent.

If you are ever in a dire situation and choose to use desperate methods to load a horse, ask yourself, "Can I keep this horse out of my space?" Think of it this way; your horse is afraid of the trailer. If you use something forceful or fearful enough to overcome your horse's fear of the trailer, you are setting yourself up to be the path of least resistance for your horse to get out of the situation. For you to stay safe, any time you resort to the use of

fear or force, the level of that fear or force needs to be kept below the level that overcomes your ability to keep your horse out of your space.

Alternate Loading Techniques

Most horses will get into a trailer with the driving or leading technique, alternating between the two, or using both techniques together. However, sometimes you will have a horse that does not respond to the normal loading techniques, or you may not have time for your horse to learn that the trailer is a good place to be. In these cases, there are several alternate loading techniques that might be effective. Good judgment must be used when choosing one of these alternate methods because they have the potential for causing a wreck.

Alternate loading methods fall into three categories:

Physical encouragement

Irritation

Fear

Physical Encouragement

The first way to use physical encouragement is the same technique often used to load horses into the starting gate at a racetrack. Two people lock arms behind your horse and lift him into the trailer. Obviously, you will not be strong enough to actually lift your horse, but this should be your intention. For this to work, there needs to be an element of surprise. If you take too long getting set, and your horse becomes aware of your arms around his hind end, this method will not be as effective. Care must be taken to stay to the side of your horse in case he kicks. Also, be careful not to overstress your back or shoulder; don't use this technique if you already have a back or shoulder injury.

The second method of physical encouragement is a butt rope. The rope used for this should be a large diameter, soft rope long enough that two people can pass it around your horse's hind end while standing near his shoulders. As with leading, you will keep a steady pressure on the rope and release each time your horse makes an effort to move toward the trailer. A release does not mean you totally slack the rope; you just need to lighten up a little, momentarily, and then continue asking for more effort. If your horse does not make an effort to get into the trailer, increase the pressure on the rope. Watch your horse's reaction carefully. Horses that are not used to a rope around their hind end may initially freeze and then explode if you increase the pressure too much.

Irritation

This method encourages your horse to get into the trailer by stopping the irritation every time your horse makes an effort to load up and increasing the irritation every time

your horse moves away from the trailer. A suitable irritation is tapping your horse's hind legs just below the hocks with the lead rope, a whip, or a stick. You could also tap your horse's croup or the ground just behind your horse. For this to work, the irritation needs to be great enough for your horse to want to get away from it, and the releases need to be well timed.

Fear

The last method is using fear. With this method, you are presenting your horse with something he wants to get away from more than he wants to avoid getting into the trailer. A flag or a rattle bag (a crumpled up paper bag inside of a plastic grocery sack on the end of a dressage whip) works well for this. With one person at the trailer with your horse, a second person approaches your horse from behind waving the scary object. As with all methods for loading horses, it is important that the person providing the stimulus watch for any effort by your horse to get into the trailer. The stimulation must diminish each time your horse makes a try and should increase each time your horse tries to move away from the trailer. It is vital for your safety that the stimulation is not overdone.

Conclusion

My experience working with difficult horses has taught me the best way to load a horse is to make the trailer a good place. If the horse feels safe and comfortable in the trailer he will load. Our efforts to encourage a horse to get into a trailer often only serve to reinforce the horse's idea that the trailer is not a good place to be.

When choosing how to load a horse into a trailer, keep in mind these three things:

Don't get yourself hurt.

Don't get your horse hurt.

Your horse should be better at loading when you finish than he was when you started.