

Load your Horse Safely

- Jennie Hakes

Scenario

Have you been to a show or clinic where someone's horse balks at loading in the trailer? The handler is frustrated, and soon bystanders start offering help in the form of any number of methods: longe whip, broom, rope around the butt, war bridle, enticement with feed, sheer manpower, shouting, etc. Anxiety is high, the horse is having none of it, and no one is happy. When the horse does load, the door is slammed shut, and off they go. Why would he want to go through that again?

I have witnessed this scenario enough that I am sharing my three go-to methods of training a horse to load. I have yet to work with a horse I couldn't teach to load (knock on wood).

When to train

The time to train your horse to load is not the day he **has** to load. Trailer-loading should be a part of every horse's education from the get-go, regardless of age. "But I don't haul anywhere with my horse!" you say. Consider these scenarios. What if he gets hurt and you need to haul him to the vet? What if there is a fire and you need to haul him to a safe place? What if you need to move him to another barn? What if you sell him? Once a horse learns to load, he will remember when the time comes - if you make safe loading a habit.

The goal

Your horse should step into the trailer quietly and obediently without the enticement of hay or treats. He should likewise unload quietly and obediently. He should load and unload as many times as you ask him. **Important:** *Safety for the handler is primary, then safety for the horse, so if things go south in a bad way, don't be afraid to stop.*

Preparation

This assumes your horse knows the basics of how to lead and how to back up from halter pressure. If not, start with that.

Never train without the trailer hitched to the truck. Ideally your trailer has an escape door for you, but it is not required. The floor should have a non-slip surface. Ramp or step-up doesn't matter. If you have a movable partition, take it out or move it over and fasten it for training sessions until your horse is a confirmed loader.

Ideally your equipment consists of a rope halter, 15' lead rope or longe line, and a long dressage whip, but I have done it with a regular halter and longe line. Gloves and hard boots for you are a good idea.

If you have access to an indoor or fenced-in outdoor arena, park your rig in it. This removes distractions like wanting to graze; it also contains the horse if he gets away from you. Lacking that, park the trailer in an open area where you and the horse can't run into anything. Other things you might make use of are corral panels, standards and poles – something to make a chute. These are not necessary, but with some horses it does make the job easier.

Method 1 – The “go forward” cue

I learned this method ages ago from John Lyons’ magazine “The Perfect Horse.” It is based on teaching the horse to move from a “go forward” cue. You need a very long whip and a long line.

Start away from the trailer, somewhere where the horse is peaceful. Stand by the head and tap the horse’s croup with the whip. Go tap-tap-tap. If the horse moves forward, stop tapping. If he doesn’t move, go TAP-TAP-TAP a little harder. Repeat until the horse moves forward, even if only one step. The goal is that the horse moves forward without question from the “go forward” cue. Once you have that response, start moving his feet in the direction of the trailer. If the horse stops, it’s OK. If the horse moves backwards, then repeat the tap-tap-tapping, and stop tapping when the horse steps forward. No need to use your voice, stick to the tapping. Every once in a while, lead him away from the trailer and give him a break, then resume. Eventually you will be able to tap him up to the trailer, then one or two feet into the trailer (then back out), and finally all four feet in. Once in the trailer, if he wants to come out, let him. After about 20 or 30 times in the trailer, he will stop trying to rush out. Then you can teach him to quietly step out from a tug on the line. Tip: Making a chute with jump poles can help.

This does not all have to happen in one session. I taught my yearling how to load this way, and sure enough a year later he had an accident, and I had to haul him to the university. He stepped right in, even with the pain in his knee. Loading had been fixed in his brain. He is 26 now and still has no hesitation loading even when he hasn’t gone anywhere for years.

Method 2 – Longeing

This is based on the Clinton Anderson method. The idea is that you make the trailer the place where the horse gets to rest and relax. To do this, you ask the horse to choose work or get in the trailer. You need preferably a rope halter and a long rope or Clinton Anderson lead rope (I like it because of its weight). To start, work the horse on the longe line away from the trailer, reversing directions back and forth. Then move closer to the trailer so the horse has to go between you and the trailer. Change directions a lot. Work all sides of the trailer, not just the entrance. The horse might get excited, but eventually you will have him walking calmly between you and the trailer. Then point the horse at the trailer and ask him to go in. If he doesn’t, go back to the longeing and moving his feet. The point is that the trailer is where he gets a break. Again, all this doesn’t have to happen in one session. You do not want a fearful horse. You are just giving him a choice between longeing and not longeing.

Method 3 – Backing up

This is the Monty Roberts method and works on the same principle as method 2, which is to make the trailer a place to rest. First make sure the horse knows how to lead and how to back up. Walk him to the trailer. When he stops moving forward, back him up 20 feet. Lead him towards the trailer, and if he stops, back him up. Repeat until the horse gets closer to the trailer and finally walks in. Backing up is hard work, and a horse will eventually get the idea and go in the trailer.

This is the method that worked for each of my warmblood mares, who often put up a bit of mare-ish resistance. I would get out the rope halter, back the mare up once or twice and then she would walk right in.

Getting off the trailer

If you have an open trailer where you moved the divider, it's OK if the horse turns around to come out, but you need to teach him to back out. If you have a straight-load he of course will not be able to turn around. Either way, your horse must know how to back up from halter pressure. If the horse is standing calmly and not trying to get out, now you can go in the trailer with him. Stand at his head. Ask him to back up slowly, one step at a time. No rush. If you have a helper, have her pull on the horse's tail to cue for the back out. Eventually the horse will unload just from a tail pull.

Finally

Don't tie the horse in the trailer until he is peaceful and not trying to leave it. Ditto for closing the back ramp or door. Practice opening and shutting the door so he doesn't think "I am outta here" whenever the back is opened.

Know when to quit. The method you use has a lot to do with the type of horse you have and his physical condition. If one method doesn't work, try another. Remember, you can stop at any time and resume another day. Don't think the horse has "won" if you don't get him in. Horses are not out to get you! If you start losing your cool, **QUIT**, because training done in anger or frustration is never kind or productive. There aren't too many disobedient horses, but there are a lot of confused and misunderstood ones.

Keep in mind is that whenever you are on or around a horse, you are training him. It can be good or it can be bad. Make trailer loading a good experience for both of you.