

Trailer Loading

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Cowgirl Image*

Horse-Training Article



Disclaimer:

Please use common sense when applying any Horse-Training advice. Horses are dangerous animals, and extreme care must be taken when working with them. Before applying any of the techniques given to you, use your own best judgement. You are responsible for your own safety -- as well as that of your horse, your property, equipment, etc.

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Trailer Loading

By Kimberly Keown - Cowgirl Image www.cowgirlimage.net

Probably millions of people have problems loading their horse into a horse-trailer. Whether it's a front-load, slant-load, two-horse, or stock-trailer, horses don't want to load into them. Who can blame them? Walking into a moving metal box with a floor doesn't seem like much fun!

The Truth

The truth is, trailer-loading problems are halter-manners problems, not horse-trailer problems. Horses that refuse to load into a trailer do not respect the halter, and the way to cure the trailer problem is to address the halter problem.

When the handler pulls on the halter-rope to cue the horse to walk into the trailer, the horse that refuses to load will immediately shift his weight back, plant his feet, then probably toss his head in the air. All of this is to evade the halter, not the trailer! I guarantee that a horse who balks at a trailer is also disobedient on the halter rope at other times -- such as tying, leading, longing, etc. In each case, the action is the same: shift the weight, plant the feet, toss the head.

The cure for this type of disobedience is to use either a Chain (under the horse's chin -- not over the nose) or a Be-Nice Halter (see the HT Equipment page). Because the horse does not want to load into the trailer, it's crucial that he respects the pressure of the halter more than he fears or resists loading into the trailer. A plain halter is too mild to convince the horse to lead where he does not want to go, so the Chain or BN Halter gives him a lot more incentive.

Do not load the horse into the trailer until both you and your horse are comfortable using the Chain or BN Halter. Once the horse works well in general with a Chain or the BN Halter, then it's time to try the horse-trailer. Definitely have the Chain or BN Halter on the horse during the horse-trailer training sessions.

NOTE: If you are using a Chain, make sure it's adjusted so there's no extra slack hanging off the halter, or else the horse could hit himself and/or the trailer sides with it when he tosses his head. Also be careful when using a BN Halter, as the slack, bottom rings the halter rope connects to can be tossed around and do the same thing.

Do not use grain or other treats to bribe your horse into the trailer, unless you are completely at your wits-end! First of all, it probably won't work beyond getting the front legs loaded. Second, you are ignoring the real problem -- which is the horse's lack of respect for the halter. If you don't solve that problem, the horse will never load consistently.

It can take several sessions or more to successfully load the horse into the trailer. Be patient and do this right, or else you'll be fighting this battle for a long time to come. If you do it right, you'll be able to load your horse anytime, anywhere.

The steps below work best with a 2-Horse Straight-Loading Horse-Trailer. Go to the bottom of the page to see the amendments for other types of trailers.

Steps ONE: Preliminary Loading

1. Walk the horse up to the horse-trailer and stop about 3 steps away.
2. Get into the trailer yourself, at whatever spot you intend to be at when the horse loads. Wherever that is, however, make sure it's to the side of where he'll step up. NEVER stand directly in front of a horse!
3. GENTLY urge the horse to step up to the trailer -- not in it, just right up to it. If he pulls back, turns away, or tosses his head, give him enough rope to let him do that, then gently lead him back up to the trailer. Make sure he comes up to it straight and is not standing at an angle, or has his head angled away from the trailer.

NOTE: If the horse pulls away, give him just enough slack to let him do so, but not too much. Keep a little tension on the rope, or he may rear or feel rewarded for pulling away.

4. Repeat step 3 until the horse will quietly stand at the trailer's entrance. Until the horse at least does this much, he is not ready to move to the next step. Be calm and gentle with the horse, as the idea is to make this as quiet an experience as possible. If you fight the horse because he's tossing his head or otherwise acting up, he's likely to bang his head on the trailer roof, and one or both of you will probably get hurt. So give him slack on the halter rope if he's backing away or turning away from the trailer, then lead him back up once he stands still.

Do not turn the horse in a circle, or turn him away from the trailer. Do not walk him away from the trailer, and then back again. This teaches him that if he resists the trailer, he will be allowed to walk away from it. Simply straighten him out and do what's necessary to get him pointed directly at the trailer, then lead him forward.

Steps TWO: 1st Step

1. Once the horse comfortably stands quietly at the entrance of the horse-trailer while the handler is positioned inside the trailer, it's time to ask for the first step into the trailer. Gently pull on the halter rope for 1 or 2 seconds, then gradually release the pressure. (As in the NOTE above, release completely, but don't give the horse tons of slack.) If the horse responds to the pressure by either stretching his neck forward, or actually taking a step into the trailer, then you used the right amount of pressure.

If the horse ignored the pull, use a little more pressure next time. Keep using small, short pulls and releases of the halter rope until the horse either stretches his neck forward or takes a step into the trailer. Make sure the release lasts at least 3 seconds before you pull again. This keeps the horse from feeling pressured, and becoming agitated.

If the horse threw his head up and backed away from the trailer, make sure you aren't using too much pressure. Then go through Steps ONE all over again, until the horse stands quietly at the entrance of the trailer, and doesn't put up much resistance when you gently tug on the halter rope. The more agitated your horse gets when asked to take that first step inside, the more important it is to successfully accomplish Steps ONE all over again.

2. When the horse finally takes that first step into the trailer, he will probably take it right back out! Let him do this, and even let him back a step or two away from the trailer if he wants to. Once he's standing quietly, lead him back up to the trailer, give him a minute while he stands quietly in front of it, then ask him to step into the trailer again.

If he paws the trailer with his hoof, tug on the halter rope or otherwise distract him -- even if that means backing him out of the trailer. Do not let him paw the trailer or otherwise act in such a way, or it will become a habit and undermine his good halter manners.

The horse may also be startled by the echo of the trailer floor when he puts his hoof on it, so be ready for this. He'll get used to it before too long.

3. When the horse calmly and consistently puts one foot into the trailer and holds it there, ask him with a gentle tug on the halter rope to bring the 2nd foot up. Repeat steps 1 and 2 until he calmly stands with both front legs in the trailer.

Steps THREE: Back Legs

1. Once the horse quietly stands with the front legs in the trailer, it's time to ask for the back legs. Still standing well to the side of the horse, use the short, gentle tugs and releases that you used to teach him to load the front legs. Again, if he becomes agitated and backs out of the trailer, let him. Repeat Steps ONE and TWO until he calmly loads the front legs again and doesn't become agitated about the tugs for the back legs.

If he refuses to move those back legs, gradually increase the pressure of the tugs on the halter rope, until you get some sort of response -- even if that response is to back out of the trailer. If he backs out, start over again. This is where the Chain or BN Halter comes in, because they will get the horse's attention and motivate some kind of reaction -- as opposed to the horse getting stuck for life with his front legs in and back legs out! Always wait about 3 seconds between tugs, to allow the horse to react -- or not -- to the first tug, and to settle down if he becomes agitated.

2. Eventually the horse will load with all four legs in the trailer. He may not stay there, so let him back out as often as he wants to. Aim for calmness. Eventually he will feel comfortable standing in the trailer.

Do not feed him while standing in the trailer -- that will only distract him from his fear of the trailer. What calms him the most is the knowledge that he can back out as often as he wants to. And knowing that his handler will quietly lead him back to -- and into -- the trailer will prevent him from becoming resistant once he does back out.

Steps FOUR: Close Trailer Door

1. Once the horse quietly and consistently loads into the trailer and stands there quietly for up to 10 minutes at a time, then it's time to close the door. The horse should NOT be -- or have been -- tied at this point. He should stand quietly in the trailer either with the handler holding the lead rope, or the rope placed in the feeder in front of the horse, or set on top of something. Make sure if the rope is set down, that it isn't wrapped around anything. The horse should be able to back out of the trailer freely. It's extremely dangerous to tie a horse into a trailer with the door open, so NEVER do that!

NOTE: If you are using a Chain or BN Halter, it's better to have someone hold the rope rather than set it down on the feeder. You don't want the horse to accidentally step on the rope and pull that Chain or BN Halter tight, and you don't want them to swing around and hit something. If you have to, take off the Chain or BN Halter and use a regular halter while you work on the door-closing sessions.

So, with the horse standing quietly in the trailer -- and not tied -- then the door may be swung partially closed. If the trailer has a butt-bar, do not use it. Just work with the trailer door. If the horse becomes nervous about the partially closed door, swing open the door let him back out of the trailer. If he remains calm, then open the door anyway. Wait for several seconds, and do this again. Then again. Then again.

2. Once the horse calmly stands in the trailer while the door is partially shut and opened again, then back the horse out of the trailer, wait a few minutes, and reload him. Repeat Step 1.

3. Now you can close the door completely, but don't latch it! Stay well to the side of the horse, and quietly open and close the door. Back the horse out of the trailer, reload him, then open and close the door again.

4. When the horse is absolutely calm about opening and closing the door, loading and unloading, then again opening and closing the door, you are now ready to latch the door for short periods of time. Practice Step 3, only now with the door alternately latched and unlatched. Vary this with partially opening and closing the door.

Steps FIVE: Butt-Bar

1. Now the horse is ready for the butt-bar. Unload the horse, stand him in front of the trailer entrance, and move the butt-bar around so he can see it. If it spooks him, then quietly and slowly work with him until he's no longer frightened of the sound and movement of it.

2. Load the horse into the trailer. Gently move the butt-bar around and make some noise with it. Let the horse back out of the trailer if he becomes frightened.

3. When the horse quietly stands inside the trailer and ignores the butt-bar sound and movement, close the trailer door. Now you should be able to fasten the butt-bar. ALWAYS close the trailer door before fastening the butt-bar. And be VERY careful to keep your hands clear so they are not smashed if the horse backs up into the door!

Steps SIX: Tying

1. Now you can tie the horse into the trailer. Never tie the horse until the door is closed and the butt-bar fastened.

ALWAYS take off the Chain before you load and tie. NEVER tie a horse with the Chain on. If you are using the BN Halter and have never tied the horse in it, don't start now! Unload the horse, replace the BN Halter with a regular halter, then reload and tie.

I don't recommend taking the Chain off while the horse is inside the trailer. Some horses become frightened or upset when they hear and feel the Chain come off, and there's too much chance of injury if the horse tosses his head and hits you, himself, or the trailer.

Steps SEVEN: Unloading

1. Untie the horse. ALWAYS untie the horse before removing the butt-bar or opening either the side door or loading door.
2. Unfasten the butt-bar.
3. Open the trailer door.
4. Hopefully -- as per your training -- the horse will stand quietly even after the door is opened. If not, he will back out, and you can catch the halter rope as he comes out. (Remember, the Chain should not be on at this point.)

If he stands quietly, then gently tug back on the halter rope to cue him to back out. Let him back out as slowly as he wants to. The horse should never rush out of a trailer, as he can easily hurt himself and develop a bad habit.

Because of your quiet, calm earlier training, the horse should already be a pro at backing out of the trailer -- so this part should go fairly smoothly.

Congratulations!

Here Are The Amendments For Other Types Of Trailers:

1. With a large stock-trailer, the horse will be able to circle around and walk straight out of the trailer, rather than backing out. Be very careful when first loading the horse, as he will probably load into the trailer, whip right around -- maybe even spooking when he comes in contact with the trailer sides as he turns -- and get right back out.

A stock-trailer offer echos, and the hollow sound of the floor as the horse walks on it offer scares horses loading the first few times.

Be ready to turn with him and get out of his way if he does this. He also may JUMP out of the trailer -- not step -- so be ready for this. He's also likely to stumble and fall out, if he's upset. (Horses can be extremely ungraceful!) Aim for eventually getting the horse to quietly turn and walk out of the trailer.

Don't tie the horse in a large stock-trailer. Let him load and lead back out. When it comes time to close the doors, have a friend help with the doors while you hold the horse inside the trailer. Once the horse calmly allows you to close the doors without latching them, then you can unclip the halter rope, let the horse stand loose in the trailer, and latch the doors. (Get out of the trailer yourself, of course!) To unload, before opening the door all the way, catch the horse and clip the halter rope back on, then lead the horse out the trailer. (If you have a stock-trailer with open slots on the sides, you can latch the halter rope from the outside, and then you already have a hold of him before you enter the trailer yourself.)

2. With 2-4 Horse Slant-Load Trailer, be very careful about attaching any of the bars that restrain the horse inside the trailer. They may make him very upset until he's used to them. Use special care in introducing them to him.

Also with a small Slant-Load Trailer: there is no escape door or barrier to separate you from the horse, so be extremely careful when loading him. As with large stock trailers, once the horse is inside the trailer, he may try to turn around and walk out. While you may have no choice but to let him turn and walk-out the first several times, I recommend teaching him to back out of a small trailer, if you can. You will have more control over him, and he'll be less likely to exit the trailer before you've given the command to do so. You can also teach him to turn and walk out -- it's good for him to know how to do both.

***Does reading these steps make loading a horse seem relatively straightforward and simple?
Well, it's not.***

The truth is that many horses will not load into the trailer smoothly, no matter how gentle, patient, and consistent you are. That's why you have the Chain or Be-Nice Halter:

- When the horse whips his head away from the entrance of the trailer and tries to leave the scene, you have enough halter-force to pull him back in the right direction and get him straight and facing the trailer again.
- When the horse gets within 5 feet of the trailer entrance and refuses to come any closer, you have enough halter-force to create some kind of response -- so that he doesn't just stand there with his feet planted for an hour or two while you both engage in a battle-of-stubbornness. Remember, give him just enough slack to let him back up or turn away if he wants to -- just calmly lead him forward again once he stops. (Try to prevent rearing, as some horses will rear while backing up when they are upset.)
- When the horse has his front legs in the trailer and absolutely refuses to even try to step up with a back leg, you have enough halter-force to get the horse's attention and create a response and movement -- even if that movement is to back out of the trailer.
- When the horse is half-way in the trailer, tossing his head, and hitting the top of the trailer with it -- you have enough halter-force to restrain some of the head tossing, and either help lead him forward or let him back out somewhat calmly.
- And when your horse has loaded fine a hundred times, then suddenly decides that he's either frightened of the trailer for no reason, or doesn't want to load this time -- you have enough halter-force to convince him that, yes -- he does want to load this time, and no -- he's really not afraid of the trailer!

As always when working with horses, be extremely careful and use common sense!

NEVER loop the halter rope around your hand or arm or anywhere it could be caught, dragged, or stepped on.

If you don't know how to correctly use a Chain or Be-Nice Halter, learn to use these tools in a safe environment, with a horse who is already used to them. Teaching yourself and the horse at the same time is a BAD idea!

And be sure to use these tools on your horse before the trailer-loading sessions. Make sure he's comfortable with them before he's put into a pressure-situation such as trailer-loading.

Good Luck in Your Trailer-Loading Adventures!