

## Trailer Loading – The Big Picture By Chris Irwin

Why is it that some horses put up such a fuss about loading into a horse trailer? While a predator like a dog, cat or human, likes to snuggle up in a cozy little den (doghouse, kennel or cabin in the woods) a horse is an inherently claustrophobic prey animal that doesn't naturally walk into a tight space that it can only get in or out of from one direction. A horse needs to feel more open space, more avenues of potential escape.

Considering this, if a horse is sorely lacking in either respect or trust for a person then why would that horse override their most basic instincts and face their innate fears for that same person and be willing to walk into a potential trap? If a horse is rude and pushing a person around on the ground, shouldering into them while being walked on the lead rope, or constantly dragging people around on the end of the lead, then why would that same horse load into the trailer if it doesn't feel like it? It makes no sense that people who let horses push them around should expect that horse to do anything they want it to do. On the other hand, people who get rough with horses and bully and intimidate them may get away with it most of the time but if a horse is truly afraid of getting into a trailer then ultimately they will often look at taking the "consequences" they encounter for not going in as the lesser of the two evils.

And what if your horse doesn't seem to be afraid of the trailer and does indeed appear to have both respect and trust for you but he or she still will not load into the trailer - then what's the problem?

If your horse allows you to walk it right up to the edge of the trailer, but then does things like walk half way in then come back out, or just stand there and not load, or does the proverbial one step forward two steps back, then the problem is most likely that your technique for loading is somehow confusing the horse and actually getting in the way of your horse being able to load.

All too often, people try to tell the horse to "get in" the trailer by trying to push or pull the horse into the box. The problem is that *the trailer becomes the place where the pressure is*. However, the way to tell a horse where to go is by telling it *where not to go*. Just like how the banks of a river channel the direction of the water with blocking/boundary energy, we need to funnel our horses where we want them to go not push or pull them to steer them into places they would rather not go. In other words, there must be blocking pressure everywhere except in the direction of the trailer. Once the trailer becomes the place of least resistance, if a horse both respects you and trusts you then it walks right into the trailer.

The idea is that you ask a horse to go forward and once the horse starts to move you simply block off every direction except the way into the trailer. You say, "go forward and don't go left, don't go right, don't go backwards. This means that the trailer in front of them is the only place where there is no herding pressure on them. However, when people say "get in the trailer" with a push or a pull attempting to load the horse into the

trailer, then the horse says but I'd rather go left, right, or backwards where there is no pressure. It's a simple concept really, to channel horses towards the path of least resistance, just like loading cattle into a stock trailer with a chute system instead of trying to pull them into the trailer with a rope attached to their head. What the horse needs from us are boundaries, like a fence, that blocks off every direction except the path into the trailer.

There have been countless magazine articles published on the subject of safety with regards to loading horses into trailers but still, having said that, I'd like to highlight a few of the most common concerns. First, as I mentioned earlier, attempting to load a horse into a trailer is not the time or place to establish neglected respect or trust. Both respect and trust need to already be well established with competent groundwork before you try to load a horse into a trailer otherwise the drama can, and often will, escalate very quickly into chaos.

Secondly, loading big athletic horses into the smaller, cramped, two horse trailers originally designed for smaller horses is hardly fair to a horse and can also be a recipe for disaster. Having said that, no matter how small, or how large a trailer, many of the older trailers have far too many sharp edges, points, and rough welds on them that will rip a horse open wide. Making sure that floor boards aren't rotten so your horse doesn't break through while driving down the road. Always shovel the manure out of the trailer as often as possible so that the horses don't slip on it and go down. Using quick release snaps that are attached to the trailer and NOT the halter so that you can get your horse undone in case of emergency without making a bad situation worse by going to his or head to get them loose. The list goes on and on and most people have heard of all of these. However, I think a safety concern that not enough people realize is that you should never tie a horse up if the butt bar and/or back of the trailer is still open. During loading, I've often seen horses try to step back out of the trailer when they know the back door is still open, only to find themselves tied by the head, and then they go to step back forward but then a back leg get hooked and stuck under the back of a step up trailer. If the "stuck" horse panics it can end up with a badly thrashed leg or even worse, a broken leg.

I believe that during loading the back door should be closed first before the butt bar is done up and then lastly you tie the horse. The reverse is true for unloading the horse - always untie the head before dropping the butt bar and then lastly open the door. Also, never stand directly behind a trailer door when opening or closing them. If you open and close a trailer door from the side instead of standing directly behind it then you're not going to get smashed if a horse suddenly comes out backwards suddenly or kicks the door.

In closing, on a somewhat lighter note, have you ever noticed how common it is that so many people are able to load their horses to go to a horse show but then they suddenly have problems when trying to load them again after the show to go home? It's kind of amusing, really, that so many horses were willing to leave home to go to the show but they do not want to leave all the new horses they have encountered at the show when its time to go back home. It's just another example that these really are thinking/feeling

creatures and they do indeed have a mind of their own. Our responsibility is to learn how to think like horses, and act like horses, so that we work with the nature of the prey animal instead of against it.

Happy trails and safe trailering!