

Traveling with your horse

By Nicole Vaugeois

Horses competing in CTR's often have to travel great distances before they even set foot on the trail. The competitions take place all over the province and if you are competing in Nationals, even further. For those of you who want to have your horse arrive in top condition for performance, this article might contain a few helpful tips for you to consider.



Before the journey

Plan ahead.

For those anticipating travel to a ride, pre planning is where you can really save yourself stress at later points in the journey. Ensure you take enough lead ropes, tack and rugs for all horses and sufficient food and water with you. If you are going any distance, make sure supplies are available at all rest stops and that there will be opportunities for feeding and water at least every 6-8hr.

Know your route.

Travel with good road maps, make sure to take the directions to the ride site with you in the cab of your truck and have a cell phone with you should you need to call for directions or emergency. Give yourself plenty of time to arrive at the ride site so you are not driving faster than you should. Before loading, check that the vehicle is safe, especially the floor.

Across the water

Many competitors are nervous about taking their horse and trailer on BC Ferries for competitions on or off island. Riders can make a livestock reservation with BC Ferries to help cut down the time spent in line ups. They will ask you the length of your rig so be prepared to have this information available as you are charged by the length of your horse and trailer. It is recommended where possible to try and take the Departure Bay to Horseshoe Bay route to cut down on travel through Vancouver. And, where possible, avoid travelling during the hottest part of the day.

Trailer training.

Your horse will pick up on your nerves when heading to competition so make sure that you calm down before loading (load them last). Now is not the time to practice trailering your horse – make sure your horse is familiar and comfortable in the trailer prior to the day you depart for the event. Consider making sure horses feel comfortable wearing travel boots and are safe to load and unload.

Hydration

Hydration is a critical issue for CTR horses. It is important to prevent dehydration and reduce the risk of impaction colic by encouraging your horse to drink. Some people camouflage the taste of strange water with additives, such as apple juice. Give this in advance, so that the horse will not notice any change. Make sure not to put your horse off drinking of its own accord consider offering water frequently rather than forcing it on your horse.

During a journey

You've got him into the trailer, have all your gear and now you head off down the road. If your journey is more than 4 hours in length, you should consider stopping and letting your horse rest either in the trailer (if temperature is cool enough, or by exiting the trailer). Muck out where possible and avoid travelling in the heat of the day. If the travelling conditions are hot or humid and the horses sweat more, then water obviously should be offered more frequently.

One of the biggest problems for the long-distance equine traveler is the practice of tying horses up by their head collars so that they are stuck in an unnatural head-held-high posture. Normally, they would put their head down, but while travelling they are prevented from doing so. This will affect the clearance of mucus from the airways, as well as causing bacteria to descend towards the lung. Together, this increases the risk of pneumonia and chest infection, known as shipping fever that affects about 6% of horses if they are transported for more than 8-12hr.

After a journey

At every opportunity, horses should be allowed to put their heads down and to eat and drink. Once unloaded, they should show interest in hay and water within 2hr and if they are not interested, should have their temperature checked. Watch carefully for any lameness, temperature changes or dehydration.

In an article by Horse and Hound in 2005, Karen Coumbe found that recent work on immunological effects of transport concluded that there are measurable differences in immunity of transported horses. Following transport stress, their immunity takes about 24hr to recover, so they may be more susceptible to infectious disease. The same work showed that cross-tied horses are more likely to suffer from dehydration and immune system dysfunction than those carried without head restraint.

Hopefully these tips will help you prepare for long distance travel and allow you and your horse to arrive safely and in good condition for CTR's in the 2009 season.



About the author

Nicole Vaugeois is the Secretary of the BC Competitive Trail Riders Association. She has ridden in Competitive trail riding since 2004, organizes schooling rides to introduce riders to the sport and manages a CTR in Nanaimo. Nicole is also a member of the Backcountry Horsemen of BC and has her level 2 Wilderness Guide Certificate from Spruce Lake Wilderness Adventures.