

# Trailer Loading 101

*By Tammy Knutson*

We have all witnessed it; some of us have lived through it, the horse that refuses to get in the trailer. It can be a frustrating and occasionally dangerous experience and not the way most of us want to spend time with our horses. What I hope you will learn from this article is some basic principles on how not to be the one coaxing, clucking, pulling and pushing your horse into or out of a trailer. It may also save both yourself and your horse from avoidable trailer loading injuries, because let's face it, horses and humans get hurt in trailers every year.

Off the top I will confess to a couple of facts. Several years ago I was one of those people that could not get my horse into my older straight haul trailer. No amount of trickery, clucking, or brute strength would get that horse into that trailer. So out of sheer desperation, I rushed out and purchased a roomy angle haul, which, with a lot of persuasion I was able to get my horse into so I could attend the clinic. Another fact, I now practice Natural Horsemanship (the clinic I mentioned was the first of many Natural Horsemanship clinics), therefore I now understand and believe in doing things **with** my horse not **to** my horse. There is a distinct difference in my mind between "getting" your horse into a trailer and your horse **wanting** to be in the trailer.

So let's get started and I mean that literally, now's the time to start. First rule; **don't wait until you're late for the show**. Just because your horse loaded last year and it only took you 15 minutes to convince him or her into the trailer, don't assume this year will be the same (or dare think better). Instead be prepared, if you're lucky enough to have your own trailer get out the trailer now. Park it in the field or paddocks for a day or two, even if you can only manage a couple of hours have the trailer visible, do your spring clean up, sweep out the back, clean up the tack area, check the trailer over and make sure everything works. Horses are naturally curious and after a long boring winter this activity will peak their interest in "what's going on?" One of the biggest mistakes we humans make with our horses is our unique ability to be direct line thinkers. Meaning, we get it in our heads we are **doing** something today. For example bathing our horse, we will get out the hoses, the buckets, scrub brushes, whatever paraphernalia we think we need to bath a horse. We assemble it all at the designated bath site, then we fetch the horse and proceed to bath the horse, with no consideration to whether the horse wanted a bath or not, then we get upset if they dance around or try to avoid the soap bucket. We are **doing** something **to** the horse not **with** the horse.

A better approach is invite the horse to sniff all the buckets, sponges, brushes, turn on the water so it's just a trickle, let the horse sniff the hose, play with the water, most will be curious, then start by wetting the sponge let the horse sniff, touch, then gently put the sponge on their neck or shoulder, somewhere you touch them all the time and go from there. You get the picture? Do things **with** your horse like a partner, the same applies to trailer loading and unloading. I mention this as unloading a horse from a trailer is potentially more dangerous than loading. This due to the fact that usually a human is in the trailer with the horse when they decide they don't want to unload and, in typical horse fashion, a horse's expression of not wanting to do something can be catastrophic.

Rule number two, **don't trick your horse into a trailer**, horses are prey animals and their only defense is their ability to run from danger. From a horse's perspective a horse trailer is nothing more than a metal cave....think about that for a moment....a smart prey animal would never allow themselves to be cornered or lead into a cave, self preservation kicks in, that's why we see such violent reactions' in our horses when they say "no" I am not going in there or worse, now that you've tricked me into here, I'm going to fight to get out! If you trick your horse into a trailer once...the next time won't be so easy, if you get him in a second time, so no trickery allowed.

Can food or treats be seen as trickery? Some would say yes, others would say no. I will leave that up to you to decide. What I would not condone is, not feeding your horse for several days and then put his ration of grain or hay in the horse trailer. That, I would say is tricking a horse into a trailer.

What you are asking the horse to do is go into a dark, tight space, be tied (or not depending on preferences) and stand for several minutes or hours in a swaying, whistling metal cave, so prepare your horse for this. In fact, I encourage all of you to take a short ride inside of a horse trailer, just so you know what the experience is like; it might give you a better appreciation for their apprehensions about getting in the trailer.

Here is an example of tasks for prior and proper preparation for Trailer Loading, you can customize to your own unique circumstances.

- Have your horse go between obstacles; this will mimic the tight squeeze of the trailer. Set up an obstacle like a barrel 10' from a fence, don't lead the horse, point (lift your lead rope) and direct with either your other arm or a crop or stick – have the horse walk between the barrel and the fence with you following a couple steps to the side and behind. Gradually reduce the number of feet between the barrel and the fence, do this every day. The key is having the horse go through with the pressure of the fence and barrel with confidence in both directions. Practice this technique when you are putting your horse in his stall or going through a gate, make it part of everyday life.
- To help with the backing out of the trailer slowly and with confidence, teach your horse to back into his stall, through gates. Teach him to come forward towards you then back up; again and again. For fun, teach your horse to back up when you pull their tail, this sounds funny but if your horse is in a straight haul this makes it so much easier.
- Practice having the horse tied, not just at his normal hitching rail; try a tree, a sturdy fence post. Remember he will be tied for minutes or hours increase the duration of being tied, start with short periods and lengthen to hours.
- Think about preparing him for when the gate or butt rope closes behind him in the trailer. Getting him use to ropes and things touching his back legs and butt will save an explosive reaction in the trailer.
- Attach a tarp to the side of the barn or horse trailer or? Have an assistant help you create a "ceiling" to walk under, this imitates the downward squeeze in the trailer.

If you are fortunate enough to own your own trailer you can practice loading and unloading without going anywhere. Attach the trailer to your vehicle for better stability, then practice having him put his front feet in, then back him out, reward him with a rub or a treat then ask him to go in again, back out again, then ask for the whole body, then back out again. It is safer if you can send your horse into the trailer without leading him into the trailer. Some horses will take longer to build up the confidence to go into a trailer without you leading the way so to speak. It is up to you to decide, you know your horse best, there are no hard and fast rules just think of safety first. You get the picture, once he can load confidently then go for a ride around the block. Unload, load again, wait for a few minutes then unload. Do this over several days or weeks, be creative vary the pattern, what your working towards is trailer loading to be a “non event” something your horse will accept as readily as being saddled up for a ride.

Now I know this all sound very simplistic and in a perfect world it would work every time for every horse. Reality is it will take practice, patience, persistence and a true desire to work with your horse to achieve hassle free trailer loading. However, once accomplished it will take your partnership to a higher level and more, you will be amazed at what that higher confidence will do for both of you out on the trail.

*Tammy Knutson is a lifetime member of BC Competitive Trail Riders' Association, rode for BC in the 2008 National Championships and won the Overall highpoint rider in 2008 for BC.*