

4-Step Trailer Loading

Here's a roundup of advice from top trainers on how to safely teach your horse to trailer-load.

You've likely had a problem loading your horse in the trailer at one time or another. The reason for the refusal might not have been clear, but a few training techniques can help him load in almost any trail situation. One rule of thumb: If you teach your horse to load well in the daylight, you won't be stuck with a horse that won't get into the trailer at midnight.

Here, we'll first give you general trailer-loading advice from several reputable trainers. Then we'll take you step-by-step through one horse's trailer-training experience, explaining how he learned to load with ease. For each step, we'll add insightful commentary from other trainers. You can apply these techniques to your own trailer-loading efforts.

Trailer-Loading Tips

Trailer-loading techniques abound: using feed as a lure, butt ropes to prevent a horse from stepping back, and the "halter-pulley method," which uses leverage to practically force a horse in a trailer. But these methods usually have limitations.

Feed, for instance, is a temporary solution, at best. "If your horse is sick or colicky, your horse isn't going to give a hoot about whether there's feed in the trailer," notes Lisa Bockholt, a select John Lyons certified trainer based in Kingsville, Texas. "And if you're out on a trail ride and you don't happen to have any feed to load up to go home, you'll be in a pickle."

Sometimes the fault lies with your trailer. Joe Andrews of Mountain Magic Ranch in Loveland, Colorado, says you should first evaluate your trailer for weaknesses. For instance, if you have an older trailer with bent braces under the floorboards, your horse will feel the "give"



Trainer Vallerie Sweeton starts the training session with the "go forward" cue, tapping Paint Horse gelding Jet on his upper hip while cueing him with a kissing sound.

and refuse to load, fearing that it's unsafe to rest his full weight on the trailer floor.

Safety for the handler, first, and the horse, second, is paramount. In fact, many trainers train horses to load on cue from a distance to enhance handler safety.

One common safety decision is whether to get into the trailer with your horse (other than closing the gate and butt bar in a slant-load). Vallerie Sweeton, head trainer at Horses of Hope Riding Center Inc., in Baxter Springs, Kansas, prefers not getting into a trailer with a horse. "Inside a trailer is a tight space, and there just isn't room for error," she says. "If a horse slips, spooks, and so forth, I don't want to be in there with him."

Step #1: Teach the "Go Forward" Cue

Trainer Vallerie Sweeton helped Shelia Mishler and her 11-year-old daughter, Paige, to load Jet, a Paint Horse gelding who'd recently begun refusing to load. Sweeton started with the "go forward" cue, tapping the gelding on his upper hip while cueing him with a kissing sound. She also

pointed Jet's nose in the direction she wanted him to go as she gave the cue.

"I'm teaching Jet that he needs to go forward when I ask him to," Sweeton says, holding a crop. "He'll learn when he gets a little tap on the hip, it means walk forward. I'm starting gentle — touching and giving a kiss. Then I'll gradually build the pressure with the crop. As soon as he moves forward, I'll let off. I'll do that on both sides.

"As soon as he walks forward, I quit tapping," she continues. "If he backs up, I'll try to keep myself in position with him and keep giving him the cue until he makes an effort to step forward. I may have to kind of boogie along with him a little bit."

Trainer comments: Larry Levretts of Heart to Horse in Bandon, Oregon, also uses the "go forward" cue when teaching a horse to trailer load. He then loads and unloads the horse repeatedly until he's comfortable.

But first, he says, you need to gain your horse's trust. He notes that horses "read" people during ground training the same way

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Sweeton works on the “go forward” cue away from the distraction of the trailer.

they do a rider. “A trailer, from your horse’s point of view, is a scary place to go,” he says. Therefore, he continues, your horse must know that you love him, that you’re in charge, and that you can be trusted.

One way to gain that trust is by helping your horse overcome his natural fears. As a flight animal, he feels trapped in a trailer, and his natural instinct is to escape. The worst thing you can do, Levrets says, is to shut the door when your horse loads the first time, essentially trapping him in a scary situation. Instead, reward him by allowing him to step back out when he feels threatened. “Be persistent and consistent,” he adds.

Also avoid putting too much pressure



Jet tries to back away from Sweeton to avoid the trailer-loading session. Sweeton patiently stays with him and continued reinforcing the “go forward” cue.

on your horse to load; reward him each time he makes an effort, and back off if you sense he’s feeling uneasy. As Andrews puts it: “If your horse is nervous about

getting into the trailer and you put a little extra pressure on him for that last little push to get inside, he’s up there thinking, *I’m not sure this is working out.* Discipline yourself to not only try to load your horse, but also make each trailer-loading session comfortable for him.”

Step #2: Be Patient

Once Sweeton taught Jet the “go forward” cue, the Paint started testing her, rearing and tossing his head in an effort to get loose. He also backed away from her — and the trailer-loading session. Sweeton patiently stayed with him and continued reinforcing the “go forward” cue.

When a horse backs up in this situation, one school of thought is to let him

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A horse will often sniff and paw at the trailer to check it out. Here, Sweeton notes that Jet has “loaded his head,” making slow-but-steady progress.



Jet “loads his feet.” Trainer Larry Levrets notes that horses tire easily with two feet inside the trailer and will often either back out after a while or go on into the trailer.

continue backing until he tires and is ready to go forward. A former handler had used that technique on Jet, but instead of learning to go forward, the gelding found that backing allowed him to avoid loading into the trailer.

When Jet calmed down, Sweeten led him to the back of the trailer. He put his nose about four inches above the trailer floor and sniffed it, then licked his lips and chewed. "I won't force this horse into the trailer," she says. "It's his decision to load. Right now, he's sniffing and checking it out."

It isn't long before Jet has moved his entire head in the trailer. Sweeten points out to Shelia and Paige that she's "loaded his head."

Trainer comments: Bockholt is also a fan of taking it slow. In fact, before bringing the trailer into the picture, she'll practice moving a horse through a gate or chute, or over a log. "We've got to stop focusing on the trailer, because what we're trying to teach a horse is to go forward on cue and go backward on cue," she says.

Before introducing the trailer, Bockholt will ask a horse to move one hoof forward and backward on cue, then eventually all hooves. "Teach the 'go forward' cue," she says. "And don't forget about the 'backup on command' cue or you'll get that sucker in the trailer and have a devil of a time getting him out."

Step #3: End on a Good Note

By the end of an hour, Sweeten had managed to settle Jet down at the back of the trailer, where he was collecting himself



Sweeten loads Jet after the gelding has walked into the trailer during a previous session.

but says she wanted to leave on a positive note and pick it up the next session. She was calm, and so was the gelding.

Don't lose your temper, Sweeten stresses, whether you're loading your horse in your backyard or at

midnight at a trailhead. "Horses are so in tune to what's happening around them," she notes. "And if they're already stressed to the point that they don't want to load and then you're going ballistic on them, they'll have an even bigger reason to be stressed and uncooperative."

"Stop, take a few deep breaths and get your focus, intention, and attention in place, and then your horse will have a better chance of regaining his composure and cooperating."

Trainer comments: When a horse doesn't load within a certain time frame, Bockholt says, handlers tend to "lose it," but you'll have great success if you stay calm.

Levrets adds that if you act as though you have all day, the loading might take 15 minutes, but if you act as though you only have 15 minutes, it'll likely take you all day. "Just remain calm no matter how your horse reacts," he says. "People have a tendency to get uptight. The horse feels that and gets more nervous. Leave anger at home, and soon your horse will find your level and load for you."

Adds Andrews: "If a client has a problem loader and they hire me to try to get the horse to load, I don't guarantee that the horse will load the first time. I'll work



Owner Paige Mishler easily loads Jet for the first time after Sweeten has taught him to load.

to go in. He put a front hoof in, but took it back out. "That's fine," Sweeten says. "Eventually, he'll put it up there and leave it." Jet then put his front hoof in the trailer for a brief moment once again.

If Jet would load, Sweeten would let him go in and out a few times. "I'll let that happen a little bit, then I'll just say, 'No, you've got to wait in there for me.' I'll let him go in and come out a few times, and realize he's not going to die," she explains.

Sweeten didn't load Jet the first day,

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for up to three hours, and then we're done. I'll come back another time, because you get to the point where you're frazzled, the horse is frazzled, and you're just not going to do anything positive."

Step # 4: Introduce New Circumstances

In the second session, Jet loaded into the trailer. On the next try, he loaded calmly when Paige flicked the rope. He was taken for a short ride, brought back, and loaded into the trailer. Paige then pulled gently on a few tail hairs to cue him to back out. He backed out calmly, not even rattled when he had to try a few times to find the ground with a back hoof. His head was down in a relaxed manner as Paige led him from the trailer.

Since then, Paige has loaded Jet for a horse-camp excursion and for a local show. The gelding did become rattled around ropers on horseback swinging their ropes, but he eventually loaded. Paige has successfully loaded and unloaded Jet every time since.

Once your horse loads easily, says



Once your horse loads easily, says Sweeten, load him under a variety of circumstances, such as in a thunderstorm, on uneven ground, or when conditions are far from perfect.

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from perfect. Some situations challenge even "easy loaders."

That said, when faced with uneven ground at a trailhead, it's best to try to find a more

level spot to load, says Sweeten. "Sometimes we expect the horse to accommodate us for every little thing, but if uneven ground makes it difficult for him to load, then help him out some," she says.

Trainer comments: If your horse has a problem loading in difficult situations, he may not be as trained as you think he is. "Every time I've been on a trail ride and had to help someone load, the problem has been a lack of preparation," Andrews says.

In difficult situations, the trainers say staying calm will help you get your horse loaded with minimal struggle. 

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His articles about horses have been published in a number of equine publications. He also writes for the office-equipment industry.

Trainer Resources

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