

# Horse Trailer Maintenance and Trailering Safety



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Horse owners will usually find it necessary at some point in time to trailer their horses. Trailering may be necessary at time of purchase, for horse shows, trail riding, or a medical emergency. Whatever the need, it is important to be prepared and knowledgeable about trailering safety. Poor preparation of the horse, trailer or towing vehicle can turn a pleasurable outing into a horse owners nightmare. Poor truck and trailer maintenance can result in traffic accidents or breakdowns such as: a flat tire(s); a broken axle, spindle or spring; and motor failure. In more extreme cases, broken welds can cause a trailer to become detached from the towing vehicle. Perhaps the most serious problem that can result from improper trailer upkeep is having a horse fall through rotted floor boards; especially during travel. This fact sheet will provide the basic concerns involved in horse trailer maintenance and trailering safety.

## **THE TRAILER**

- When purchasing a horse trailer consider the needs of your horse. The trailer should possess:
- Ample height (7-8 feet) and width (6-8 feet) for the horse(s) being hauled.
- Rubber mats on the floor and tailgate to provide traction and cushion during loading, unloading and travel
- Tie ropes or chains of adequate length with quick release safety snaps
- Adequate padding on chest bar and stall sides
- Interior lights for night time hauling
- Air vents on the roof and along side panels

**Regular maintenance checks should be performed on a horse trailer every time it is used. Routine items include:**

- Tires need a minimum amount of 1/4" of tread (check with your state Division of Motor Vehicles for the measurement); be adequately inflated and have no signs of dry rot cracks. Spare tires also should be checked.

- Jacks and safety triangles or reflectors should be in good working order in case of breakdown. (Ignitable flares should not be stored in the horse trailer because of fire potential)
- Floorboards should not be rotted or in weak condition.
- Replace any boards that are questionable. To help lengthen the life of a trailer floor, mats should be lifted after use and the floor swept or hosed out. If the floor is hosed be sure it is dry before the mats are replaced. Yearly applications of a weather sealer on the floor boards will also extend their life.\
- Any screws, bolts or nails that may have worked loose and are protruding from the inside of the trailer should be removed.
- All lights (marker, tail, brake, directional and interior) should be working and bright.
- Hitch welds, safety chain welds and snaps should be in good repair.
- Grease hitch ball as necessary.
- Wheel chocks should be in good condition and used anytime the trailer is unhitched from the towing vehicle.

### **Yearly maintenance checks include:**

- Inspection of frame for cracks and wires for loose connections and frayed covering
- Repair or replacement of rotted or rusted metal
- Greasing of all hinges, springs, etc.
- Inspection of ramp hinges and springs for weakness and cracks
- Wheels should be pulled and bearings checked and repacked
- Inspection of spring shackles for wear
- Inspection of brakes and emergency break-away cable, pin and control box

## **HORSE TRAILERING SAFETY**

### **Preparing the Horse for Travel**

- Practice loading and unloading the horse in the trailer well in advance of any scheduled events; especially if the horse is unfamiliar with trailering. A battle getting into the trailer is an unpleasant way to start a journey or end what had been an enjoyable day.
- Horses should be trailered in a leather rather than a nylon halter. In an emergency situation (such as the halter becoming snagged) a leather halter will break more easily and is less likely to injure or burn the horses head.
- Wrapping a horses legs for travel not only protects the legs from injury but adds support. It is important to ensure that the wraps extend below the coronet band to protect this area. (See Rutgers Cooperative Extension Leaflet #609 Horse Bandaging: A Practical Art - for the proper way to wrap a horses legs.)
- Always remove all tack (saddle, bridle, harness) from the horse when trailering.

### **Loading the Horse**

- Whenever loading or unloading horses, it is best if two people are available to do the job.
- Use a cotton lead rope or leather lead when loading or unloading horses. This is advisable in the event that the horse rushes backwards pulling the lead through your hands. Nylon leads will blister, burn and cut hands when pulled quickly.
- Before walking a horse into the trailer, make sure that chest bars and escape doors are open for the handler to exit safely. Never climb under or over dividers, chest bars or the horse to exit the trailer. Never leave yourself in the position of being trapped in the trailer with the horse between you and the exit.
- Make sure that the trailer is securely and properly hitched to the towing vehicle before loading a horse. Never load a horse or leave a horse in an

unhitched trailer. Do not unhitch a trailer with a horse still inside. Trailers are very unstable and can easily tip on end.

- When loading a single horse, place the horse on the left side of the trailer. When trailering two horses, place the heavier horse on the left side. This will make towing the trailer smoother and the ride easier for the horse because of the crown contour of the road surface.
- When approaching the ramp make sure the horse is in the center of the ramp so that the horse does not step off the sides.
- Always secure the butt bar/chain before tying the horses head. If the horse pulls back before the butt bar is in place it wont break the tie, the halter or fall down. Do not stand directly behind the horse when hooking the butt bar in case the horse flies backwards.
- When tying the horses head use a safety-quick-release knot or a tie with a panic/safety snap (See Figure 1). Make sure the horse has enough rope length to permit head movement for balance, but not to get its head down or over to the horse traveling alongside.

## **Traveling Safety**

- Most horses take to trailering naturally, while for others it is often a traumatic experience. It is important that a horse be happy and secure when being trailered. One bad experience in trailering is all it takes to make a horse a bad hauler. A bad hauler is hard to cure.
- Before starting to travel check to see that the horse is comfortable, that ventilation is adequate, and that the hay bag or manger is securely fastened so that the horse cannot become tangled in it.
- Test all doors to make sure they are secure and that the hitch is tight. Safety chains should be in place and all lights and brakes functioning in accordance with your states Division of Motor Vehicle codes.
- Turns, starts and stops should be very slow and steady.
- Do not exceed the speed limit. Remember to allow extra stopping distance when towing a trailer. Moving horses and the weight of the trailer will push against the towing vehicle.

- Do not allow anyone to throw lit cigarettes or matches from the window of the towing vehicle. Wind currents often suck the cigarettes or matches into the trailer, causing a fire.
- Check on the horse(s) at every stop or every 100 miles. At this time also check the hitch, safety chains, lights and hay bags. Keep hay bags full and offer the horse(s) a drink of water.
- Avoid backing up with the trailer if at all possible. If backing is necessary it is advisable to have a person outside the vehicle to watch and guide you.

### **Unloading the Horse**

- When lowering the ramp keep feet and hands out of the way.
- Untie the horse before lowering the butt bar.
- Do not stand on the ramp or directly behind the trailer when a horse is exiting in case it leaves the trailer quickly. It is not advisable to allow a horse to fly back quickly as this soon becomes a bad and dangerous habit.
- Try to keep the horse straight as it backs down the ramp so that it does not step off the side. Walk the horse around after trailering for an extended distance to restore circulation and ease stiff muscles.

### **Other Safety Precautions**

- When tying a horse to the outside of a trailer, use a safety- quick-release knot or panic snap. Make sure the rope is short enough that the horse cannot get a leg over it, but long enough to allow free motion of the head. Never tie a horse to a trailer with a rope length long enough to permit grazing. This is where the most serious trailer accidents occur.
- The ramp to the trailer should be in an up position when tying a horse to the outside of the trailer, especially when the tie rings are located towards the rear. A ramp in the down position leaves space between the back of the trailer and the springs where a horse can easily get a foot or leg stuck. The ramp is also the right height for the horse to injure its lower legs on.

- Never leave a horse tied to the outside of a trailer unattended. When leaving a horse inside a trailer, make sure the chest bar and butt bar are secure, especially if an escape door is left open.
- Do not tie a horse to the outside of a trailer when it is unhitched from the towing vehicle. Horses are stronger than we think and a panicked horse can and will drag an unhitched trailer behind it.
- Trailering your horse is a fun and rewarding experience. As long as common sense is used and the safety guidelines above are followed trailering accidents are less likely to occur.

## **REFERENCES**

- Basic Horse Safety Manual. American Youth Horse Council in Cooperation with the American Horse Council. 1989.
- Trailer Safety Checklist. Equus Magazine, 151. May 1990. This document is FS607, a series of the Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Publication date: Revised: March 1992. Publication date: March 1992.

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