

OUR EXPERT

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Justine is a certified equine behaviourist who applies the science of behaviour and learning to help owners solve a wide range of issues with their horses. Visit: www.equinebehaviourist.co.uk

Loading success

Equine behaviourist **Justine Harrison** reveals how you can create a step-by-step plan to train – or retrain – your horse to load every time and travel happily in a lorry or trailer

Travelling in a horsebox or trailer is one of the most stressful things we ask our horses to do. Research has shown that even competition horses that are seasoned travellers can be stressed by a journey.

From the horse's point of view, it does make sense. We expect a prey animal to leave the safety of his home and friends, and be confined in a small, rattling tin box, then cope with being flung around, without warning, if our driving is bad. It's not surprising they might not want to repeat the experience.

Sadly, when a horse doesn't want to load, people resort to all manner of equipment and techniques to force them on.

The horse may be hurt or frightened by whips and lunge-lines or confined into fenced channels so they have no choice to load.

In my job as an equine behaviour consultant, I have seen horses that have previously been zapped with electric cattle prods, blasted with jet washes and physically lifted onto lorries. It's no wonder some of them are now terrified of the process and refuse to go up the ramp.

While not everyone wants to go to clinics or competitions, it's important any horse or pony will load, as you might need to move him to a new home, or take him to the vet for emergency treatment.

Ensuring a horse is happy to load and travels well should be an integral part of their training, however it is often sadly overlooked.



Reward every effort your horse makes, no matter how small

“If you frighten, trick or force a horse to load and they have a bad experience, he may be frightened of travelling for the rest of his life”

What's in it for the horse?

There are many factors that make loading and travelling difficult for a horse – being confined in a small space; travelling alone or next to a horse they dislike or fear; leaving home; the strenuous physical exercise needed to

balance and being too hot or too cold. It may be that a journey always ends with an experience they don't like, such as injections at the vets or a stressful show.

The whole process can be so stressful it is vital when training – or retraining – your horse ▶



With the right approach, you can train your horse to load and travel happily

to load and travel, that you make it as positive an experience as possible.

The aim is for your horse to enjoy travelling, and by training him positively, we can teach him the trailer or lorry is fun.

If you frighten, trick or force a horse to load and he has a bad experience, it will leave a lasting impression – he may be frightened of travelling for the rest of his life.

The right training approach can work, but it does require time. Expect to take around a month to build the horse's confidence by gradually introducing – or re-introducing – him to the trailer or lorry.

Don't plan to travel anywhere during this time, unless it is an emergency.

TIP from the TOP

A horse has almost 360 degree vision and may be distracted by things you cannot see, so ensure the loading area is quiet.

The right preparation

Set your horse up for success by preparing the environment:-

- Park the trailer or lorry in a safe, enclosed environment that is familiar to your horse – perhaps in a paddock or a quiet part of the yard.
- Remove or move partitions to offer as much room inside the vehicle as possible.
- Ensure the ramp is level, steady and not slippery to walk on.
- Open doors, windows and the side-ramp on a trailer, so the vehicle is light and airy.
- Hang up a carrot-studded net of hay or haylage in the trailer or lorry;
- Enlist the company of a calm equine friend.

Make the trailer appealing by hanging up a haynet studded with carrots



Using a trail of feed bowls with a few carrots or treats inside can encourage a horse to go forwards



Create a training plan

Most people make the mistake of asking their horse to do too much, too soon. Once the horse has loaded, they close the ramp and drive off, reinforcing the horse's fears that he is trapped inside the scary vehicle.

Creating a step-by-step training plan, where your horse has a choice and is rewarded for

each step he takes towards the end goal, will build his confidence and make the whole process fun.

To create your plan, consider what the horse can do now and make this your first step. The finished skill – or behaviour – is your final step. So, work out what your horse's current comfort zone is. When the ramp

of the lorry or trailer is down, where is he relaxed and happy to stand, either on his own or on a loose leadrope? This could be 30ft away or standing with two feet on the ramp. This is your starting point.

Then, decide what you will need your horse to do in your 'worst case' travelling scenario. For example, a 20-minute drive down the

Positive training tips

- Have your horse loose in a safe enclosed area or in a flat headcollar with a loose leadrope, giving him the choice to move away if he wants. Never force him to go forwards.
- Reward every effort your horse makes in the right direction with a treat or wither scratch. This could be after something as simple as one step towards the ramp or into the lorry.
- Watch your horse's body posture and facial expressions at all times. You want him to be relaxed and happy to proceed. Triangulation of the eye, seeing the whites of the eyes, tension in the face, a tucked chin, tight lips, a high head carriage or stiff body posture are all early indicators of anxiety.
- If you are worried your horse may be becoming anxious, take a break, and the next time you have a training session go back a step or two and start again.
- Schedule in regular training sessions of no more than five to seven minutes at a time. Short sessions repeated frequently will get the best results.

Open doors, windows and the side ramp and move over partitions



Don't close the ramp until your horse is happy and relaxed while standing in the trailer or lorry



TIP from the TOP

Many horses prefer to travel facing backwards, so try travelling your horse in transport that allows you to do this.

What are you training?

Consider carefully how you raise the level of difficulty for your horse and only add one criteria at a time. Different factors to consider are:-

- Confinement – entering the lorry or trailer, having the partition closed and the ramp put up behind them;
- Sound – the engine being turned on and the partitions rattling;
- Equipment – being happy to wear travel boots or a rug, in and out of the trailer;
- Company – loading with or without the company of another horse;
- Movement of the vehicle – accelerating, turning and braking;

● Draughts – a window being open while the horse is in transit.

Training two criteria at the same time may be too much for your horse, so add one at a time. For example, if you are at the stage where your horse has just gone up the ramp and is standing inside the vehicle, don't expect him to immediately cope with being confined by the partition being closed too.

Ensure he will stand on the box consistently for several sessions and reward with a small feed each time.

Once he is relaxed about that, gradually close the partition towards him, a foot at a time, rewarding him at every stage.

An example training plan

Every horse is an individual, and should be treated as such in training, as no 'one size fits all' plans exist. Some example steps from a training plan could be:

- 1 Stand around 5ft away from the bottom of the ramp, with the horse relaxed.
- 2 Stand with the horse relaxed at the base of the ramp. Give your horse plenty of time to look at the trailer.
- 3 The horse stands relaxed with one foot on the ramp.
- 4 He places two feet on the ramp, and is still happy and relaxed.
- 5 Walk up the ramp, reward him, and then lead him out.

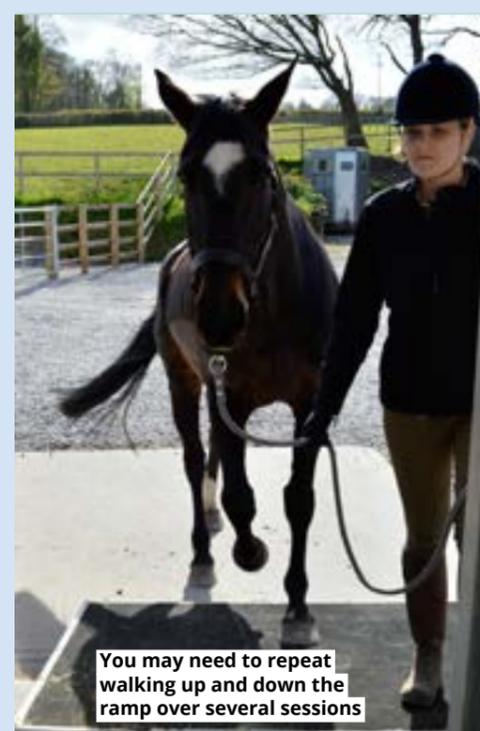
Reward your horse at each stage. If he's happy to go a step further, let him. Alternatively, turn away and repeat the same step.

You may need to repeat walking up and down the ramp for five or more sessions before he is totally confident to go further. This is fine – go at your horse's pace, take it slowly and don't ask for too much, too soon.

Always start a new session by recapping the previous two stages, to ensure your horse is confident and the behaviour is well established before moving on.

TIP from the TOP

Be flexible – your horse may skip some steps or be slower than you'd like, so alter or add steps to your plan as you go.



You may need to repeat walking up and down the ramp over several sessions

Drive carefully – as if you were carrying a glass of water on the vehicle's dashboard



Dos and don'ts

- DO Ensure your trailer or lorry is serviced and safe to use;
- DO Take your time and don't rush;
- DO Stock up on treats and have plenty to hand;
- DO Arrange to have calm equine company to help with your training plan;
- DO Enlist a calm friend to help you when travelling;
- DO Keep training sessions short and always end on a good note;
- DO Stay calm and have fun.
- DON'T Be tempted to force your horse to load;
- DON'T Let other people take over and frighten your horse;
- DON'T Be tempted to ask for too much, too soon.

Keep journeys short at first

Once your horse is consistently loading and relaxed, with partitions in place, travel boots on, in company or without company and with the ramp up and engine on, then you can go for a very short drive.

To start with, just go 50 yards or so then stop, reward your horse and unload him.

Go a little further on each subsequent journey and plan short trips somewhere nice for your horse – for example, a quiet lane with a tasty hedgerow.

Unload him and let him graze before loading him to return home.

Once your horse is confident with short trips, try loading him into other vehicles, with different horses and take short journeys to various places.

Travelling is physically hard for horses. They can't see where they are going and need to constantly balance themselves against the movement of the vehicle. So, consider travelling as part of your horse's exercise and

don't expect too much of him after a long journey.

If he doesn't want to load to come home, it may be because he is exhausted and is not ready to travel again. ■