



OUR EXPERT
Justine Harrison



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.

Lightening the load

In the first of a two-part series on easier loading, qualified equine behaviourist **Justine Harrison** considers why horses may refuse to walk into a trailer or lorry and offers some tips to improve the situation ▶

With the correct training, you can overcome your horse's fears of travelling

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There are few things as frustrating as your horse standing at the bottom of the ramp refusing to move, especially if you are preparing to go to a show and the time for your class is fast approaching. Even worse, perhaps, is when you are at a competition or training session and he won't load to come home.

Loading and travelling problems are extremely common and come in various forms. There are horses that flatly refuse to load at any time, while others only load sometimes.

Some horses will run up the ramp but travel badly – perhaps arriving at your destination sweaty and anxious – or kick the partition for the duration of the journey. There are even horses that won't unload.

Most horse owners will need to transport their horse at some point, whether that's to competitions and lessons on a regular basis, or once in a while to move yards.

You may even need to move him urgently in an emergency situation, to equine hospital, for example, so it is vital he will load and travel with minimum stress.

However, while loading and travelling is seen as an everyday occurrence, it's often overlooked as part of a horse's training.

Why loading issues occur

If a horse doesn't want to load in a lorry or trailer, it makes perfect sense – travelling is by far one of the most stressful things we ask them to do, for a whole host of reasons.

Why would a prey animal want to leave his friends and the safety of his field to enter a tiny, rattling tin box?

Horses that refuse to load are often labelled 'naughty' or 'stubborn' but this is unhelpful as there will always be an underlying reason for their behaviour:-

- **Pain:** Horses with physical problems may be reluctant to load. Travelling is hard work and requires the horse to reposition and balance himself constantly, especially if the driving is erratic. Have your horse's health checked before you take him anywhere, to ensure he's fit to travel.

Check your horse doesn't have any physical issues



Photography: David Taylor/Stroud/Lucy Merrell



Consider the reasons why your horse doesn't want to load

- **Separation anxiety:** Horses are herd animals and leaving the security of their home and friends can be frightening for them. If your horse worries about leaving his companions, arrange for him to spend time with a sensible, well-socialised equine friend and practise short separations. Alternatively you could make sure your horse always travels with calm, friendly company.

- **Insufficient training:** Many owners assume a horse will automatically walk into a lorry or trailer, yet probably have never trained him to do so. If you haven't taken the time to accustom your horse to your mode of transport, then put in some practice. Spend a few weeks working through a step-by-step training plan (see next month's issue of *Horse magazine*, on sale 6 July).

- **The horse doesn't like your lorry or trailer:** Many horses and ponies are worried by the vehicle they are asked to travel in. Consider whether there is enough space for your horse. Is the lorry or trailer dark, noisy, smelly or even too hot or too cold? Make sure



Your horse may be happier travelling with a calm, friendly companion



Don't try to force a horse to load – it may make him more fearful and more difficult to load next time

TIP from the TOP
Give your horse his daily feed in the trailer. Place his bucket on the ramp at first, then move it a little further inside each day.

proximity to another horse. You may need to work with an equine behaviourist to introduce your horse safely to others before travelling him with company.

- **Travel boots:** Some horses dislike the equipment that is involved with the travelling process, such as poll guards or travel boots. Many professional transporters don't carry horses in travel boots. If you are worried about injuries, spend time getting your horse used to boots, in the stable and around the yard. Put them on for short periods and link them to a pleasant experience, like an extra feed. Or, protect your horse's legs with a square of gamgee and bandages, plus over-reach boots. ▶

the vehicle is safe and as clean, quiet and comfortable as possible. Hang up a haynet that's studded with carrots, to make being in the lorry or trailer more appealing.

- **The journey's end:** If all your horse's trips are for unpleasant experiences, like going to the vet for injections, to busy showgrounds where he becomes anxious, or moving home away from his equine friends, he will soon learn to avoid those situations by refusing to load. Take him for short trips with calm equine company. Go somewhere the horses will enjoy, such as to graze in a field or along a lush hedgerow.

- **Fear of other horses:** Getting bullied in the field can cause a horse to be fearful of a travelling partner. Many horses are kept stabled or in individual paddocks and don't have the opportunity to socialise. As a result, they can be scared of being in such close

Some horses dislike wearing travel boots



Loading

● **Fear of confinement:** Does your horse become anxious in narrow or enclosed spaces? Try moving (or removing) partitions, to give him more space. Many horses travel better if they have room to move around and position themselves to cope with being in transit. You could simulate the set-up of your trailer or lorry in the arena using a walkway made of jumps or straw bales. Start with the space wider than your trailer or lorry and over subsequent sessions reduce the gap until it matches the width of your transport. Always praise your horse and give him a lip-curling wither scratch or a food reward when he stands calmly inside the space.

● **The handler lacks confidence:** If you are nervous about travelling your horse, or are worried about the dressage test you are on your way to compete in, your horse may pick up on this and become anxious as well. Studies have shown that if a handler is nervous, the horse's behaviour may be affected. To help you feel more confident, allow plenty of time for the whole loading and travelling process. If something happens that unnerves you, breathe deeply, stay calm and think positive.

● **The memory of a traumatic experience:** A horse will instinctively avoid anything he associates with a potentially threatening or unpleasant situation. If he has been frightened on a previous journey – perhaps for one of the reasons listed in this feature – he will unsurprisingly want to avoid the



Get your horse accustomed to being in confined spaces

experience being repeated. If your horse is reluctant to load, think back to what happened the last time he travelled, which could have worried him.

A horse that is anxious about loading will need time and retraining to learn the trailer is a safe place to be. Don't rush or

force him – take a few weeks out from travelling and aim to change his negative feelings about the trailer to positive ones.

In the next issue we will look at how we can retrain the loading process and make travelling your horse a more pleasant experience for him – and for you. ■

Next issue

Justine sets out a step-by-step training programme to help your horse load calmly and happily every time. Don't miss the August issue of *Horse Magazine*, on sale 6 July.

The trailer from the horse's point of view

A horse's eyesight is very different to ours. They have a much wider field of vision, and can be worried by things we don't notice.

Humans see directly in front. We will see only the trailer and the area immediately around it.

In contrast, horses have almost panoramic vision – pictured below. They see the trailer, everything on either side and what is going on behind them.

The clearest area of their visual field is a horizontal band, with a blurred area above and below. A horse may need to move his head in order to view some things clearly.

Be aware a horse's eyes can take up to 30 minutes to adjust to changes in light.

If you're loading a horse in daylight and the trailer is dark inside (or vice versa), he may not be able to see at all once he's inside. To remedy this, when loading in

daylight, open up the trailer to let light in, so he can see inside easily.

If you need to load at night, he may be happier walking into a dark trailer rather than a brightly lit one.

Horses have limited colour vision, which is believed to be similar to red-green colour blindness in humans. They can see blue and green, but don't see the red colours on the spectrum.

Human vision



When loading, humans only see the trailer in front of us...

Equine field of vision



...however, the horse has almost panoramic vision

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