

AMERICA'S
HORSE

Horse Trailer Loading Tips

By Bill Van Norman



From the America's Horse library

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Training for the Trailer

TEACHING A HORSE HOW TO load in a trailer is about time and patience, more than anything else. Horses are naturally claustrophobic, and we've got to give them time to become comfortable in the trailer.

When we're getting our young horses ready for our yearly sale, we make sure they're easy to load and unload, so that their new owners don't have problems when they get home. These horses are weanlings all the way up to 3-year-olds, and the same techniques work on horses of any age, as long as they are halter broke.

To start out, I'll send the horse in a circle around me directly behind the open trailer. I'll use a lead rope, not a lunge line, because I want to keep the horse fairly close to me. And I'll generally have a rope in my hand that I can slap against my leg to make noise to encourage the horse to go forward.

As the horse circles me, if he wants to stop and smell the trailer or just look in, I'll encourage that. You've got to recognize every little try – and that is one. I'll stop the horse and pet him, then when his attention fades off the trailer, I'll ask him to move out again and continue circling me.

I like to circle my horses in both directions behind the trailer, so they're comfortable being worked from either side. When the horse is circling to the left, I'll have the lead rope in my left hand, stretched slightly outward, so that the horse is encouraged to go forward. I'll have the rope in my right hand, so that when I make the slapping noise, it's toward the horse's hind end – again, encouraging him to go forward. I'll switch hands when I send the horse to the right.

When the horse is comfortable being next to the trailer, I'll ask him to enter it. If he's circling to the left, for example, I'll step into his path so he can't walk past the trailer entrance. I'll put my left

hand out, directing him into the trailer with the lead rope. And I'll shoo him a little bit with the rope in my right hand. If you have a second person to help you, the helper could rustle a flag behind the horse – just anything to make the horse a little bit uncomfortable outside the trailer.

Some horses will hop right in like it's no big deal, and others will be more cautious. If he stops and leans in, that's OK. It's a try, and I'll reward that by petting him. It's important not to start pulling on his head or pushing him in from behind when he's trying. If you pressure a horse that's thinking about getting in the trailer, you're actually discouraging him from thinking about it. You can't get in a hurry; just let the horse have time to find it.

Circle the horse some more, get him relaxed, then try again. If the horse tries to blow by you instead of going in the trailer,

By Bill Van

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*Take your time and
keep your temper
when teaching your
horse to trailer load.*



I like to circle my horse in both directions behind the open trailer door. Every time the horse stops to look in the trailer, I'll pet him and allow him to stand there until his attention drifts. He's trying to get comfortable with the trailer, and that's what we want.

you may have to be more assertive with your body language, such as raising your left hand to push him away from you. But don't lose your temper. Let the horse know by your attitude that this isn't anything to get upset about. Stay calm, and your horse should, too.

Other horses will just freeze up when they're faced with an open trailer. Luckily, there's more than one way to get a horse calmly into a trailer. Sometimes I'll take my rope, make a big loop and put it around the horse's hindquarters, just above his hocks. (Be sure your horse is comfortable with having a rope flopped around his body, first, so he's not spooked by the rope itself.)

Then I'll stand inside the trailer, off to the side, and ask the horse to step in by tugging on the rope around his hindquarters. Generally, he'll want to move off that pressure, so he'll step forward into the trailer. This works so much better than pulling on a horse's head, because he won't pull back against this pressure. It also leaves his head alone, so he can drop his head to smell the trailer. Don't ever discourage a horse from smelling or investigating the trailer; he's just trying to get comfortable with what you're asking him to do.

You'll see in these photos that I'm using an open stock trailer to work with this horse, but you can work with whatever kind of trailer you have. Whether it's one with a ramp, or a small straight-load, these principles will work. You may have to modify your body position (working around the divider in a straight-load trailer, for example), but the ideas are the same.

Sometimes a horse will put his front feet in the trailer, then back out, and that's OK, because it's a start. He's actually getting practice backing out, and he's getting comfortable bit by bit. Pet him and reward each try.

When you're urging the horse in with the rope around his hindquarters, be sure the horse is standing a few steps back from the trailer before you ask him to come forward. When he starts walking, you want that forward momentum to continue right on into the trailer. If a horse is standing right



Ever seen a horse walk up to a trailer until his cannon bones are touching the edge of the trailer? This technique helps prevent that. I'm "leading" a front foot up and into the trailer to teach the horse to step up.



I can apply pressure with this rope without tugging on the horse's face. He won't pull back against this kind of pressure, and he can still drop his head to investigate the trailer as he gets more comfortable with it.

next to the trailer, with no room to move forward, he'll usually lock up right there. I'll back him up or move him off to the side to get his feet moving.

Some babies are bad about walking right up to the trailer and putting their cannons right on the edge of the trailer – they just don't know how to step up into it. For them, I'll put my rope around one of their front pasterns. Then, on the ground in front of the trailer, I'll practice "leading" the horse by that front foot. When the horse is walking, and that foot is about to leave the ground naturally, I'll gently pull it forward with the rope. When he's comfortable with that, we'll approach the trailer, and as the baby nears it, I'll "lead" that foot forward and up onto the trailer. That gets him used to feeling the step up, and then I'll ask him to come on forward.

One of the most important things to remember is that once you get your horse in the trailer, don't just shut the door and call it good. Unload him and repeat it at least a half dozen times. You want to get the horse relaxed. I've seen people who were in a big hurry, so they got their horse in the trailer the first time and left. Then, when they got where they were going, they couldn't get the horse back in the trailer because it was a bad experience for him.

You're not going to pull a fast one on a horse. You may get him in there and get the door shut, but he's going to be smarter – and more resistant – next time. Don't ever tie the horse or shut the door until the horse is calm and relaxed inside the trailer.

And don't hesitate to ask for help from a more knowledgeable person. Think of safety first, and remember that it's always easier to train a horse that's never been loaded in a trailer than it is to untrain a horse that has had bad experiences from being forced into a trailer. **Q**

The late Bill Van Norman and his family's Van Norman Ranches in Tuscarora, Nevada, were the recipients of the 2001 AQHA Bayer Best Remuda Award, which honors the tradition of raising well-bred, well-trained ranch horses.