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CONNECTING with HORSES
& riding with *Synchronicity*



RIDING WITH *Synchronicity*

**TRAILER LOADING &
TRAVELLING HORSES**



Trailer loading is very often a big issue for horses and their owners. I believe that there are several reasons for this and they are as follows.

- Being a prey animal, horses can be fearful of going into and being locked in a claustrophobic space.
- Horses can feel anxious about the movement and noise of travelling.
- Horses who have had a bad experience of losing their balance in the trailer are scared to travel.
- Traveling can be physically uncomfortable, exhausting and tiring. The muscle fatigue that horses experience when they have to use a lot of physical effort to hold them self in balance is often not considered.
- Some horses may not be looking forward to the experience at the end of the trip. Perhaps traveling to a new destination and an unfamiliar environment is the cause of anxiety, or the pressure of competition is too much.

Many people, with thanks to the advent of natural horsemanship teachings, understand that putting a prey animal in a claustrophobic place like a trailer is a great psychological challenge for some horses.

So the principles involved to overcome this are:

- Building the relationship with the horse to one of trust so that the horse would trust that you would never put him in a dangerous situation.
- Using approach and retreat to build his confidence.
- Making the trailer a haven of safety and comfort.



I need to mention here that I have often seen this last principle be misunderstood and misused. If the outside of the trailer is made to feel so uncomfortable or even unsafe by over pressuring the horse – you might get the horse in the trailer but he often will be in an introverted emotional state when he does go in there. Physically you may have the horse in the trailer but mentally and emotionally the horse is in such a state of anxiety that he withdraws and goes inside himself. The horse psychologically is not coping and his only way of dealing with the situation is to hide this state of inner turmoil deep inside himself. This as you can imagine is a very bad place to be. When horses are in this anxious state it takes only the slightest incident to upset the horse and for them to start not wanting go in to the trailer.

As an example of this, quite a few years ago I had a horse that at the time I thought was very good at trailer loading. I would stand outside and direct that he should go in the trailer and he would trot in. He would always trot in. One day there was some dew on the rubber so as he trotted in his hind leg slipped a little. It was not much, the hind foot just slipped a few inches forward and he rushed back out and there was no way that he wanted to get back in that trailer again. But that was all it took for



the horse to completely lose his confidence. I realized that in actual fact he really hadn't had any confidence in regards to trailer loading before.

I knew that it was not possible for such a little incident to cause such a big reaction if a horse was really confident and that he had not been trotting in because he was eager or feeling good about the trailer. He trotted in because he was worried about the consequences of not going in and it was his anxiety causing him to be impulsive and rush in. I realized that the horse was introverted once he was standing in the trailer. This led me to look a lot deeper into everything that people did with horses and how they really felt on their insides about what they were doing.

In the case of trailer loading signs of the horse being introverted could be:-

- The horse is not looking around or showing any interest in the trailer. A relaxed and confident horse when standing in the trailer will sniff or look and check things out. Observing what is different, looking for feed or interacting with you or another horse.
- The muzzle will be tight, the eyes not blinking and the tail will be tight. Generally they will be tight and tense throughout the body and not breathing normally. The horse may be braced throughout the body and in the legs.

The less pressure you had to use to get the horse in the trailer the less likely he is to be introverted because he won't have gone in until he was ready. This doesn't mean that you do not have to stimulate the horse to try because if you do not have a strong intention and encourage and support him to get in and he doesn't want to go in then he will have no motivation to try. Our job is to have a clear intention and then encourage and support the horse.

If a horse is introverted going back and using more 'approach and retreat' in the loading process and using less pressure to get the



Simulating trailer loading by going through claustrophobic places can be helpful in building a horse's confidence.

horse to 'approach' can help. To learn more about encouraging and supporting your horse to try you can read the article '**Groundwork - Having a conversation with your horse through your thoughts, body language and tools**' on my website www.melfleming.com.au

If a horse is displaying signs of introversion whilst in the trailer there are things you can do to help change this pattern. Make sure the tail gate is down and the breeching bar is open and the horse is NOT tied while you do this. The horse must KNOW that he can retreat at any time and he also must know that the WAY to retreat is by backing out of the trailer, not by jumping forward or trying to squeeze out through the front door. If you have used approach and retreat well in teaching the horse to get in and not just tricked him or forced him in then he will know to back out if he needs to 'retreat'.

One of the techniques to change this pattern of being introverted in the trailer is to not allow the horse to go all the way in. Lead the horse up the ramp a few steps and then back a few steps, then forward one step and back one step etc. Get him to stop half way in the trailer and lower his head. This will just quietly

interrupt the pattern and get the horse thinking again instead of doing something robotically while being mentally and emotionally shut down. It will get the horse to acknowledge and accept the fact that he is OK in the trailer.

You will work both at a psychological level and a physical level to change this emotional state. Talk to the horse, rub him gently and reassuringly and then by changing the physical muscle tension patterns in the body you will start to affect the emotional state. Because the physical pattern that goes with unconfidence and an introverted state are tight, tense muscles, by gently massaging the muscles and gently moving the skin over the muscles in small circles, similar to the Tellington Touch method, you will physically communicate with the cells and change their tension. By not allowing the body and hence the cells to stay in the physical state needed to maintain this negative emotional state you will release that emotion and it will be replaced with a more positive emotion which is associated with soft muscles.

When the muscles let go and relax, the body cannot stay in an anxious, fearful emotional state and the chemistry and the messages relayed throughout the nervous system will change. So you will be changing the emotional state by changing the physical state of the horse. I especially like to play with the muzzle, nostrils, ears, the hindquarter muscles of the rump, the back of the thighs and gently move all the joints in the tail. This unlocks the tension and negative emotion physically trapped in the body. When working on this you would either stand up the front and have the door open so you could get out easily if you needed to or be on the other side of the divider if you were working on the side of the horse. The horse must always be allowed to retreat and get out of the trailer if he needs to. And it is quite possible that he will need to retreat as you do this because you will be bringing emotions to the surface that have been hidden.



I also like to pick up all of the horses legs while he is standing in the trailer to test how relaxed he is. PLEASE NOTE that you need to be very careful if you do this. You would be standing in the opposite bay of the trailer and would pick all four feet up from one side. You don't need to hold them up, just see if the horse can give them to you for a moment. As mentioned previously when I do this I have the back breeching bar open and the horse is not tied so he can back out of the trailer and do his own retreat if he needs to. A horse that cannot easily give you all of his feet is likely to have problems traveling because to be balanced and comfortable the horse needs to pick up and move the feet around rather than rigidly stand fixated in one place. You can imagine how exhausting and muscle fatiguing it would be to travel a long distance physically fixed and holding tight in one position.

Feeding the horse in the trailer can also help to change these patterns because the movement of relaxed chewing will not facilitate negative emotions but it will support positive emotions.

You can talk to your horse and explain about traveling. It is important to be honest though and acknowledge the fact that you know

traveling can be uncomfortable and you are doing your best to make it the best experience possible. Ask them about their fears or discomforts. I also like to do some energetic healing work with them to help release their anxieties and using some homeopathic remedies or rescue remedy can help them. It might be good to give yourself some too while you are working with the horse because often the human is just as anxious as the horse.

Your next step will be preparing the horse for the movement and noise of the trailer. Again the back of the trailer must be open so that the horse can go out whenever he feels the need and of course the horse is not tied up. You can do things like move the breeching bar back and forward, lift the pins up and down, tap the sides of the float and the roof with a stick. You can step up and down off the ramp and then progress to where you move out of the horses view. Eventually you would want to be able to bounce on the tailgate and have your horse unperturbed. Your horse will experience all this movement and noise and more when he is actually traveling in the trailer. Again you are always using the concept or 'approach and retreat'. And the more rhythmical you are in applying this stimulus the more easily accepted it will be. Approach in the sense of 'Approach and Retreat' means that you stimulate just enough to stretch the horse out of his comfort zone but only to a point where the horse can still cope with the situation. If you push him 'over the edge' emotionally you will be having an adverse affect. You retreat, or decrease the stimulation before the horse gets reactive or overly concerned or feels that he needs to physically move away from the situation. Gradually you will be increasing the levels and range of what he can feel safe with.

The more relaxed and confident the horse is in the trailer the less physically stressful and tiring the trip will be because the horse will not be holding all his muscles tight through anxiety.

Some horses go in easily but start to back out as soon as you go to close the breeching bar. Due to past negative experiences some horses once in the trailer will still go into old patterns of fear so applying what has been explained above about helping introverted horses will help.

Some horses are not terrified of the trailer itself but know that the experience of traveling is not comfortable and they are nervous about their balance while traveling. Often horses load without too much difficulty the first time they are taught to load but it is after they have had a trip and didn't feel good about it that problems arose. So apart from implementing the techniques described above we also need to look at some other factors in regard to the horse's safety and comfort whilst traveling.

Uncomfortable experience.

Have you ever travelled in a horse float or trailer? Do you have any idea of how uncomfortable, physically exhausting, noisy or hot they can be. Sometimes it can even get hard to breathe in there if there is not adequate ventilation. So anything we can do to make this experience more comfortable is important. If horses have pre-existing conditions of sore backs and weak hindquarters traveling is going to be harder for them. So treating these issues can improve the traveling experience for them. A few short trips rather than marathons with a good experience at the end destination like grazing or whatever might motivate your horse to want to travel there again will help. For example, a free play in an arena with another horse for a horse that usually doesn't have

much room or a mate to play with might be something to look forward to.

The design of floats will make a big difference and if you want to get more ideas about what design features help horses to travel more comfortably and with less stress you could go and look at the website for the JR Easy traveller www.jr-easytraveller.com This company has done a lot of research into this subject and they also have a free CD

available on some of their research experiments. I like their way of thinking and their website can give you a lot more information than I can give you here. It will give you some insight and possibly ideas on how you might be able to improve your horses traveling experience.



Here are some things that I have found important.

- Non slip floor surface. This is a very important factor to consider. Although most trailers have rubber on the floor it often is slippery especially as soon as it gets wet. I advise all reading this to go and test the floor of the float by sliding the heel of your boot along it when it is wet. Even those floors that visually appear to have a lot of grip can be slippery when wet and a horse has little chance of staying on his feet. The horse will be unconfident and physically straining himself to hold his balance if he doesn't trust the surface he is standing on.

The rubber matting on the floors and tailgates can get wet from rain blowing in the back while a horse is in transit. It can be wet from urine or even just the manure from the horse is often all it takes make the rubber slippery. If horses are

sweating through overheating or anxiety when this sweat drips and hits the floor the rubber becomes very slippery.

The better the traction between the floor and your horse's feet the safer, less physically tiring and more confident your horse will be about traveling. You may need to lay down some 'grippier' rubber matting on top of what you already have. This can also serve as protection for the spray on rubbers that are frequently used in floats today. It will prevent horses pawing through those and allowing moisture through which will start rotting through wooden floors or rusting metal structures underneath.



Another remedy is to put wood shavings on the floor. It will soak up the moisture and give more traction. The shavings need to be renewed after several uses as they can become dusty. You could also use sand or dirt on the floor and in times of desperation I have even cut open a bale of hay.

- Large front window – horses like to be able to look ahead and see where they are going.
- Light and airy - Good ventilation is very important. Many horses over heat in trailers especially when they are traveled with rugs on. Have windows and air vents open and check your horse regularly on long trips.

- Breeching bars – placing this forward of the tailgate leaving a gap between it and the tail gate allows room for tail. To aid their balance many horses sit back on the tail gate and lean on their tails even to the point of rubbing themselves red raw to take some of the stress of holding themselves upright off their back and hindquarter muscles. I have found that solid metal breeching bars are generally safer than chains as horses are more likely to go under chains if they panic and try and get out of the trailer in a hurry.

- More room to spread the legs – the wider apart the horse can spread his legs the easier it is for them to balance, so having no central divider going all the way to the floor will give them more leg room.

- Encased and supported upper body – if you go the JR Easytraveller website and view their CD this theory will be explained. It makes a lot of sense and I feel that it takes a lot of the physical strain out of traveling.

- Room to stretch the neck –This is important for comfort, breathing and drainage of the sinuses and balance. Remember that the horses head and neck is an important part of his balancing system. So room to stretch the neck will allow the horse to be more relaxed through out the rest of his body. This is often a problem and disadvantage of a lot of angle and side loading trucks and floats.

Inconsiderate driving

Unfortunately this has to be mentioned because it is seen all too often and people wonder why they have horses that don't want to load. Going too fast around corners, too fast through roundabouts, too fast on uneven bumpy roads and braking too hard are all going to make the horse's balance difficult and the trip uncomfortable. You may think I am stating the obvious but when I watch how many people drive they are very inconsiderate or unaware of what the horse is experiencing.

When you are towing your horse you have to be totally mindful of him and not worrying about holding up other traffic or being in a hurry to get somewhere. If you have asked a horse to put his life in your hands by getting in a horse float you better be sure to make it the best and safest experience you can for him.

When coming into a corner give yourself much more time to slow down so you don't have to brake hard and when coming out of a corner you should not accelerate until the float is on the straight out of the corner. Quite often you will see that the driver accelerates as soon as the car is on the straight but the float is still right in the middle of the turn.

Tying horses in floats

While we are on the topic of traveling horses in floats it is worth talking about tying horses in trailers. There is one golden rule and is that when loading a horse he should not be tied until the back is secured at least with the breeching bar across and even preferably waiting until the tailgate is up. The reason being that if the horse was to panic and try to back out of the trailer, if he felt the entrapment of the halter in that moment, he is likely to panic more, throw himself around and injure himself, scare himself or damage the trailer. When unloading the horse the horse should always be untied first before the tail gate and breeching bar is opened for the same reasons as above.

While traveling I prefer to have horses tied rather than loose. The reasons for this are that by restricting how far the horse can turn his head around he is less likely to try to turn

his whole body around if he was to panic in the trailer for some reason. In case of an emergency he will already have his halter on if you need to get him out in a hurry. If a horse did fall down in the trailer having the head tied can help stop the front end from going all the way down especially if the lead rope is tied up high. It can help the horse to stay on his feet or enable him to get up and it can prevent the head and neck from going under the chest bar.

Always use a quick release knot as well as having a knife in a place that is easy to reach to cut the lead rope if you needed to. If possible have the lead rope tied up high and then in a place where you could reach and untie it without physically having to get your whole body into the trailer.

Other safety aspects –

- Don't have loose unsecured items in the trailer that can move around and injure or get tangled around their legs frightening them or making it difficult stand.
- Check the safety of the floor and structure under the floor boards and matting regularly.
- Make sure the braking system is working correctly.
- Make sure the interior pins holding the dividers etc are kept well lubricated so they could be easily removed if needed.

Applying all of this knowledge should really help you to understand loading and traveling more from your horse's point of view and help to make the whole experience a lot better for both you and the horse.



For all enquiries and bookings contact Mel Fleming

email: mel@melfleming.com.au
02 6760 5519 or Int: +61 2 6760 5519
or go to website: www.melfleming.com.au