



Loading Zone

Q My horse takes a very long time to load in the trailer, and as a result, I rarely take him anywhere. I'm worried that if he ever needs to move or go to the vet, I won't be able to load him. What can I work on to get him more comfortable with the trailer?

A I prefer to break down large projects such as trailer loading into smaller, more achievable tasks. The three requirements for confident trailer loading are to first build a language with your horse without the trailer, challenge him with obstacles using that language, and then take your emerging skills to the trailer.

First, teach your horse to back out (and stay out) of your personal space to a distance of 8 to 12 feet until you invite him in again. This is the most basic level of communication for establishing leadership with a horse. If your horse doesn't respect your personal space, there's little chance that he will respect your request to get into a trailer.

Next, ask your horse to move toward you from the feel of your lead rope, then back him up again. Continue asking your horse to back away, then stand and wait, then walk toward you again, all without moving your feet.

When your horse understands that, begin asking him to move his neck and shoulders away from you as he is coming forward until he walks out, around and past you. After he's past you, tip his nose toward you and put pressure toward his hip until he turns and faces you and relaxes for a moment. Back him up if he walks in too close, then start again. Developing this communication to walk forward, back, around and past you will eventually become your request to load into the trailer.

As you and your horse begin to understand each other, improving your communication with each attempt, begin to introduce obstacles to challenge that communication. See if you can use the above pattern to send your horse over a barrel, under a tarp hanging over a gate, back between two poles, et cetera.

Instead of always leading your horse, see how many opportunities you can find to send your horse into the wash rack, through a gate or into his stall. The more solid you and your horse become at this, the better! When your horse can willingly and confidently accomplish

these tasks, then you're ready for the trailer.

Standing close enough to the trailer that your horse can't get in between it and you, use the communication you've established to ask your horse to move toward the trailer. As in everything you ask of your horse, the instant he even thinks about what you want him to do, reinforce his choice by releasing pressure.

Many people make the mistake of increasing pressure when their horse begins to move toward the trailer, as if to keep his momentum going forward. However, this has the opposite effect, as he will become more uncomfortable and begin looking for a way to flee from what is causing the increase in pressure—in this case, the trailer.

With each step toward the trailer, reward your horse with comfort by releasing the pressure. Before asking him to step forward again, back him up a few steps. As he steps backward, put light pressure on your lead rope and ask for a few more steps forward, then release. Wait again, but not too long, or your horse will "stall out" and quit trying. Continue this communication until you reach the trailer. Soon your horse will realize that you're having the same conversation you had with the obstacles, but now they're replaced with the trailer.

Without fear and confusion, resistance is replaced with confidence, and your horse will develop a new willingness to load confidently any time, anywhere, and under any conditions. **HI**



Karen Scholl is an equine behaviorist and educator who presents her program, *Horseanship for Women*, throughout the United States at horse expos and clinics. Her video "Trailer Loading for Women" is available at www.karenscholl.com or by calling 888-238-3447.

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