

# All about trust

Teaching horses to load safely onto vans boils down to a simple principle

by Cynthia McFarland

**A**NY wise horseman knows preparation for loading begins long before a horse is introduced to a trailer or van.

Actually, it is not about the trailer at all. It is about trust. If a foundation of trust has been built, most horses will load willingly, simply because they have confidence in the handler.

Many times things are practiced with the horse, for example, going into a starting gate, so that when it comes time to load for a race, the horse is familiar with the whole scenario. None of the farm managers spoken with to determine the best methods routinely practice loading horses into a trailer, but all of them have methods that have proven safe and reliable year after year.

## Eliminate distractions

At Lantern Hill Farm in Midway, Kentucky, even the youngest foals are handled daily and led in and out of the barn, so they learn at an early age to trust their handlers. By the time they are yearlings being prepped for the sales, that trust is ingrained. Owner and General Manager Suzi Shoemaker said it is actually like having a contract between the horse and the human that tells the horse you are the leader and he will be safe with you.

“Our sales yearlings are pretty socialized to the idea that people are safe and if they’re asking the horse to do something, then it’s safe,” Shoemaker said. “If the horse is confident in the handler and you’ve reduced

“We handle our babies a lot and teach them to have confidence in us and to lead well, and that’s the basis for teaching a horse to do anything. In 25 years, we’ve never practiced loading; we just get the horses confident in us. The skill of the people handling the horse is also important. If they’re skilled and confident, they will impart this to the horse. But if they’re nervous about trying to load the horse, the horse will pick up on this.”

Lantern Hill has its own four-horse

## GOOD BACKUP PLAN

*Backing the trailer so the doors open inside the barn keeps the horse in a familiar environment and limits distractions*



Cynthia McFarland photos

It is important that the trailer interior be well-lit so the horse can see where it is going instead

of walking into a dark, enclosed space. Shoemaker opens the trailer’s side windows to allow plenty of light and air inside.

She has found putting straw on the ramp is an almost foolproof way to get a horse to load willingly.

“If you put straw on the ramp, most babies will walk right onto the trailer,” Shoemaker said. “They seem to feel more comfortable putting their feet on straw. It’s familiar footing to them, whereas the rubber-covered ramp is unfamiliar. Now we don’t even try to load a horse without putting straw on the ramp.”

Even following these steps to make the situation as calm and horse-friendly as possible, patience is still a vital piece of the puzzle. If you avoid making it into a conflict, Shoemaker said most young horses will just walk onto the trailer.

“Be patient,” she said. “It amazes me how quickly and easily most of them will get on. Even if they’re nervous, most of them will calm down once the van starts moving.”

“When I hear about people getting hurt, it’s often when trying to load. I see a lot of people get careless when trying to load a horse that doesn’t want to go on. The handler needs to stay calm and you want to reduce all the variables of extra stimulation—loud noise, other horses, etc.—because it’s much better to have the horse focused on the trailer and not anything else. You want to stack the deck in your favor.”

## Keep it safe

“I’m amazed by what you see at the sales with people asking babies to go into a small space that’s not well lit,” said Val C. Murrell, general manager of Clear Creek Stud in Folsom, Louisiana. “The principle we use is very simple. We just reduce the horse’s options and keep things

safe. The key is making the horse have a good experience and to stay safe.”

Clear Creek has two six-horse gooseneck trailers with side ramps. For loading, the trailer is parked parallel to the barn wall so the ramp is dropped a few feet in front of the wall.

A solid smooth cinder-block wall that the horse cannot see over is ideal, Murrell noted. It blocks the horse’s vision from other distractions, and nothing can hurt the horse if it comes in contact with the wall.

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## PROVEN METHOD

*Lantern Hill’s Suzi Shoemaker says she has never practiced loading and that “we just get the horses confident in us. The skill of the people handling the horse is also important. If they’re skilled and confident, they will impart this to the horse, but if they’re nervous about trying to load the horse, the horse will pick up on this”*



Photo by Z

the variables [of distractions and extra stimulation] and make them feel safe, in general they’re going to do what you’ve asked them to do.”

Shoemaker does not practice loading. Although she comes from a pleasure-horse background where there was great emphasis on getting a horse used to the trailer before you have to go somewhere, she admitted that with a busy commercial farm, there is not really time to practice loading and unloading horses.

“If we have a foal raised here, in most cases they don’t see a van until they have to get on one,” she said.

gooseneck trailer, which is routinely used when horses have to be shipped. For a horse’s first trip, Shoemaker prefers this trailer over a two-horse box van from a commercial shipping company.

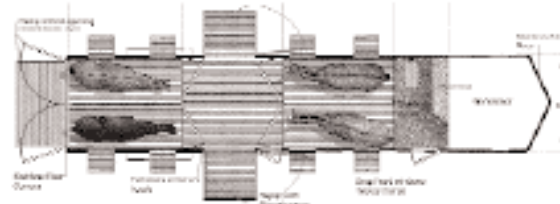
The gooseneck is backed up to the barn so that the trailer doors are used to the trailer before you have to go somewhere, she admitted that with a busy commercial farm, there is not really time to practice loading and unloading horses.

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Murrell likes to have three people when loading: one to lead, the second person at the horse's right shoulder, and the third at the horse's left hip. The second and third persons may not always be necessary, but it is easier to have them present just in case.

Rather than immediately approaching the trailer ramp, at first the lead handler just walks the horse around the area where the trailer is parked. He walks past the ramp, between the trailer and wall several times until the horse is comfortable. Then, with the second and third persons ready if needed, the lead handler turns and walks up the ramp. With the solid wall behind him and a handler on

each side, most horses load readily without a problem.

"If a horse resists, we just stand and give him some time," Murrell said. "If you get impatient and start pushing on him, it doesn't work. The person leading the horse is not there to pull the horse onto the trailer, but just to keep his head straight. The people at the shoulder and hip are just barely touching the horse, unless more help is needed. If the horse backs up against the wall, he can't get hurt. It's simple and safe for the horse and the people."

Murrell has found even horses that have had a bad experience with loading can be turned around with this method. The solid wall is a huge help, he said. It is much more effective than trying to load in an open area or alongside a fence.

"Make sure the trailer is well lit inside so they can see," he said. "If you can walk a horse in a stall, you can walk one in a van. Our van door is five feet wide, and this is important. A wide door makes all the difference because if they touch the side of their hip, they get scared and don't want to go on."

Murrell also likes to remove any bars or partitions so the horse can load into a box stall because he believes the open space makes the horse feel more comfortable loading. If you need to put the horse in a standing stall, you can always put up that partition after loading.

Murrell said that manager Yvette Barbizon is talented about schooling the farm's young horses so they develop confidence in their handlers.

"It's a trust thing," he said "If you



Cynthia McFarland photo

### OPEN SPACE

*Loading will be much easier if all partitions are opened so the horse walks into an open trailer. The horse can be kept in a smaller section by closing partitions once loaded*

### HELPFUL AID

*Bobby Jones demonstrates the use of a butt rope, which can provide encouragement for the horse to walk forward*



Cynthia McFarland photo

have time to work with them so they trust you, they'll follow you anywhere."

### Be patient

At Bryllynn Farm in Ocala, the focus is on breeding for the selected yearling sales.

Farm manager Bobby Jones finds that loading is not about practicing as much as about instilling confidence in the horse and giving it time to think.

"If you do it right the first time, even horses that have never seen the inside of a trailer will do wonderfully if they're comfortable and trust you. If you do it properly, you will not have a problem loading," Jones said.

Jones said that handling and lead-

ing foals from day one plays a big part in horses leading well and trusting their handlers.

"Particularly when loading young horses, I like to have an enclosed environment for loading," Jones said. "Depending on the barn, I'll either back the trailer up to the barn or actually pull into the barn shedrow."

This allows the trailer ramp to be dropped in the barn instead of out in the open, which keeps the horse in an enclosed area and concentrates its attention on loading. Wide open trailer doors make the space more inviting. Jones opens up all trailer partitions so the horse feels as though it is walking into a box stall, not a narrow opening.

He emphasizes that even when you set up the situation to make it easier on the horse, such as parking the trailer in an enclosed area, you still have to use patience when loading.

"When you have a ramp down in front of a young horse, it's a scary-looking thing. You have to give them time to think," Jones said. "I've seen so many horses approach a ramp and go backward, and then people start yelling, grabbing a broom, etc. You need to give the horse the benefit of the doubt and give him time to think. Lead him back up to the ramp and let him stand there. Just stop and wait. Stroke him between the eyes and don't put pressure on the lead rope. Then ask him again to make another step forward."

Pulling the horse forward is never a good idea.

"The more you pull, the more the horse resists," Jones said. "You need someone leading the horse who understands that you don't pull him, but rather direct him."

If the horse wants to drop its head and sniff the ramp or trailer, Jones lets it. The horse will feel more confident about walking into the trailer if it is allowed to check it out first.

Having a second person there to place a hand on the horse's hip can provide reassurance. If necessary, this person offers just enough pressure to encourage the horse to step forward. Should he have to load a horse by himself, Jones often uses a butt rope over the horse's hindquarters to encourage it to walk forward.

Jones likes to give a young horse a small amount of sedative to take the edge off and make the first loading experience a positive one. He finds this also helps the horse adjust to traveling and the noise of surrounding traffic as the sedative wears off 20 to 30 minutes down the road. ↗



Marie Purdue photo

### MAIN ISSUE

*Clear Creek Stud's Val Murrell says loading horses onto a trailer is "a trust thing. If you have time to work with them so they trust you, they'll follow you anywhere"*

### Loading tips

- Park so that the trailer is backed up to or just inside the barn aisle to eliminate outside distractions and keep horses in a familiar setting.
- If trailer has a ramp, park so the ramp is as level as possible.
- Put shavings or straw on the ramp to make the footing more inviting for horses.
- Have the trailer interior well lit so the horse can see inside and it is less threatening.
- Secure doors, windows, and partitions so they do not swing and startle the horse while loading.
- Remove partitions to make a more spacious area for the horse to walk into; if necessary, you can put rails or partitions in place once the horse is loaded.
- Do not be in a hurry to load. Give the horse time to drop its head and sniff the ramp or trailer if desired.
- Do not try to pull a reluctant horse into a trailer. Guide rather than pull.
- Have an extra person or two on hand to assist, if needed.
- If you are going to give the horse a sedative, give it before you go to load; do not wait until the horse resists or becomes anxious or upset.

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Cynthia McFarland is a freelance writer based in Fairfield, Florida.

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