

Trailer Loading Troubles

By Marie Hoffman

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I had the opportunity at a recent clinic to load a horse to go home when the clinic was over. The horse had been forced into the trailer in order to bring it to the clinic. He was a 16 hand sorrel Thoroughbred gelding. I am not sure of his age, but he was an adult horse. He had been a race horse. He was a halter puller that broke what ever he was tied too when he decided to pull.

The owner wanted him to get into the trailer to go home. My goal was to load him so he would be easier next time. In order to do this it had to be the horse's idea to get into the trailer. Forcing him would not have improved his loading the next time. Earlier on the day that we needed to load him, I led him in the Dingo and Cueing the Camel leading positions. The Dingo is where I lead him with a chain over the nose band of his halter and up the off side. The wand (a four foot stiff whip) is held by the handle or button end and is used to stroke the back toward the croup and to tap on the croup. The light taps on the top of the croup signal the horse to move forward.

The Cueing the Camel is when I signal forward with the Dingo, and then after the horse has taken one or two steps I signal on his chest with the wand to stop. I signal on the chain to tell the horse to move forward and stop. I am also using my voice to signal to the horse what I want him to do, cluck to move and saying "and whoa" to stop.

I used these leading positions to develop a form of communication that the horse understands before I asked him to load in a trailer. I led him through poles set on the ground. I asked him to walk one step at a time and he did.

I asked him lower his head on command. He was resistant but would eventually lower it so his poll was just below his withers. In a matter of minutes (about ten) he would walk with his head lower than his withers. It was very important that I could signal him and he would lower his head on that signal. It would have been better if he would have been quicker at lowering his head, but because of his halter pulling past, his first thought was still up instead of down when he felt pressure on his poll. When he did lower his head his whole body would relax.

During the clinic he first learned that he could lower his head, but he needed more time and practice so he lowered it every time no matter what situation he was in. In stressful situations horses naturally go into their instinctive states. Raising the head and keeping it there to stay ready for flight is a primary instinctive reaction to new or stressful situations. Only through training while they are thinking is the trainer able to teach the horse to think instead of instinctively react. You know he is starting to think when he is able to listen to the signal on the halter to lower his head and carry it just below his withers. He is then able to override his instinct of flight. The simple act of lowering his head and keeping it there enables the horse to learn to think through or look to the handler for directions instead of reacting instinctively. He does this by raising his head and looking for an escape route. While he is in this posture his body is pumping the hormone adrenaline into his system preparing him for flight or fight. Once adrenaline is in the horse's system he will have a harder time going into his thinking or para-sympathetic nervous system. There are two separate nervous systems involved: the para-sympathetic (thinking state) and the sympathetic (instinctive) nervous systems. They are engaged separately. A horse can't think through the situation if he is in his instinctive state. He can only react.

Some horses can handle this adrenaline rush, not letting it affect them; while others become more and more overactive. Just like some people can naturally handle emergency situations better than others. Though all can learn to handle this adrenaline rush; both horses and people.

This horse I wanted to load could not come back to his thinking state very easily. Once he was in his instinctive state and was challenged to do something he would pump more adrenaline into his system and become over reactive. He is not trying to be bad; it is just his body's natural reaction to stress. My goal was to lower his head and keep him in his thinking state as much as possible, thus setting the situation up to be successful.

While I was leading him, I used the different leading positions in the arena over poles set up in different situations. I set up a narrow aisle and had a jump as one wall and a ground pole as the other. I asked him to go in, stop, back and go through in as many different ways as I could think of. He was able to keep his head down once I got it there and did great. I worked him about 15 minutes. He was put in his stall until he was going to be loaded to go home. I had the owners park the trailer along the arena wall eliminating one escape route. I wanted to set the situation up to enable me to load the horse as easily as I could.

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Once the trailer was against the wall, I led the horse into the arena. We brought in another very quiet horse to keep him company. He sometimes did not like to be alone. I wanted to work on one issue at a time. Today was trailer loading. I used the Dingo and Cueing the Camel to review my signals with him away from the trailer. He did okay but not as good as earlier in the day. I was unable to get him to lower his head consistently. When I did get him to lower it he did not want to keep it down. Ideally I would have worked him for several more sessions until he was consistent. This was not possible, so I went ahead with what he could give me at this time.

The horse did not want to even approach the trailer. He raised his head and ran backward and sideways at the same time toward his right and away from me. I stayed consistent in the Dingo position with my left hand on the lead and my right hand on the wand. I did not pull on the lead to keep him from running back. He would only run back faster once I gave him something to fight, even if he was not a halter puller and he was. I never pull on the lead to stop a horse from backing. I will use the lead only to direct the horse's head in the direction I wanted. I then use the wand to signal the horse to go forward. I was able to progress rather quickly in getting the horse up to the trailer (ten minutes or so). Each time he ran back I kept tapping on his croup until he walked forward. Once he moved forward I would signal on his chest to stop. Then I would approach the trailer using Cueing the Camel every few steps. The horse's distance he ran back became shorter and shorter. When he was at the back of the trailer I gave him some oats to chew. I never use pellets, apples, carrots or anything a horse could choke on. Chewing activated his para-sympathetic nervous system. He had to stand a very long while before he was able to chew the oats he had taken in his mouth. He also did not want to look into the trailer. He kept trying to look away and for an escape route. This told me he was truly frightened of the trailer.

Unable to consistently lower his head, I used the act of chewing to help me keep him in his thinking state as much as possible. I gave or my helper gave him oats when ever he was unable to think and to encourage him to chew while he was near or in the trailer.

In about an hour of him trying every escape route. Backing as described before, going to the left and over me, he even thought of crawling under the trailer. I had at times had his front feet in the trailer, but the horse was unable to chew the grain he had taken in his mouth he was so scared. A person might mistake his refusal to do as I asked as the horse being resistant. I knew because he could not even chew he was scared not resistant. He needed time and direction not force to overcome his fears. At no time did I lose my patience. I kept taking deep breaths and stayed very calm. He was very scared and needed my calmness to help calm him. I acted as if I had until the next morning to load him and I did. There was no sense of urgency at all. I would wait until he was ready. Much of the 2 and ½ hours it took to load the horse was spent waiting for him to accept each step to go into the trailer. The sequences were, run back, lead back to trailer, stand a while, ask for a step forward. At first he ran back at each signal to go forward then he started to come forward with the signals.

The horse then put his front feet in and backed out on his own. Then he could put his front feet in and stand until I signaled him back. Occasionally he still tried to run back as he did in the beginning, but for the most part he moved forward from the signal of the wand after he came out of the trailer. He still did want to look into the trailer. Telling me he was not ready to load and would not get all the way in yet. I had my helper hold the lead and aid in guiding his head in the trailer. If he backed out she let go and I caught the lead as he came out. I signaled him back into the trailer again.

I had him stand with his front feet in the trailer a long time. He graduated to where I could back him up a step and signal him forward a step while he still had his front feet in the trailer. He was not able to move forward in the trailer from the signal of the wand until we had been working perhaps an hour and a half. I did not clock it so the times are not exact. At this point he would at times look into the trailer but not all the time. Usually at this point most horses will load in a very short amount of time. I was unable to get him to walk up until his back feet were in the trailer or even move them once his front feet were in the trailer. I backed him out and using the button end of the wand signaled him with light taps on his rear fetlock until he lifted his foot. I repeated this until he would do it with each back foot. I asked him to load his front feet again. He did. I then signaled with the wand on his hind fetlocks. Each time he lifted his foot and put it down he moved closer to the trailer. I then had to tap on his front fetlocks to get him to lift and move them. I did not care if he was moving up and down or forward.

At times he backed out but just to the back of the trailer for the most part. I just tapped him on the croup until he walked his front feet in again. I always paused when ever he moved forward from the signal and then signaled again.

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He made steady progress. Walking forward into the trailer and working his back feet closer and closer. They were at the rear of the trailer now. My helper was giving him oats to eat in small amounts in the front of the trailer to help keep him focused in the trailer. At times he was able to chew, but sometimes he would just hold them in his mouth. I signaled on his hind fetlocks and he was able after a few attempts to lift his hind leg into the trailer. He would not put any weight on it though. We let him stand like this for many minutes. When I asked him to move forward he backed completely out and backed as quickly as he did in the very beginning.

I was unable to get him near the trailer again. At no time did I hit him. I stayed consistent in my signals, as I had done all along. I often took deep breaths. Every time I signaled him forward toward the trailer he said "no" by backing away and/or half rearing when he was behind me and whirling to his left to get away. He drug me to the back of the arena a few times. He had gone into his fight instinctive state and was no longer thinking at all. We had reached to end of his ability to cope. He DID NOT want to get in the trailer all the way.

I stopped him and said to myself it is time for the human to be smarter. He had his reasons not to get in the trailer. There were marks on the walls where he had once got stuck when he tried to turn around when he wasn't tied or perhaps he had had an issue with the starting gates on the race track. It did not matter. I needed to find a way to eliminate his backing away from the trailer and going into his instinctive state.

We backed the trailer to the corner of the indoor. The right side of the trailer was still against the wall. There was an open side door about the middle of the right side of the trailer. The trailer door opened to block that escape route; it was a step up small two horse trailer. I then positioned the X type cavalletti with metal 55 gal drums against the inside of the long poles of the cavalletti. The many times he had run backwards with me into this corner with the cavalletti and barrels always stopping before hitting them, This told me he would not likely hit them. I did plan an escape route for myself should he panic once we contained him.

I created a 10 foot box behind the trailer. It was small enough to stop him from going into his instinctive state of flight because he couldn't go any where. Yet it was big enough that it did not make him feel trapped. I made sure as I signaled him, that I gave him plenty of time to think and did not push him into fighting. I had taken his flight option away by containing him. His next instincts are to fight or freeze.

He backed up out of the trailer several times, but with the barrels behind him was unable to force me into buying into his behavior and avoid the issue of the trailer. By going into his instinctive states of flight and fight he was quite busy and so was I. Then neither of us was thinking of the trailer. I wanted him to think of the trailer to learn to overcome his fear. When he found he was no longer able to back up he thought of going over the right trailer door. I had the helper use a crop and slap his nose as he stuck it over testing weather jumping over the door was a good option. Once he got his nose slapped he did not try that route again.

As I asked him to load he moved his front feet in as before and I walked his back feet up as before. He stood in the trailer with his front feet and seemed to have a little more confidence than before. At least he could chew more often. I had closed in the cavalletti until he had just enough room to stand outside of the trailer. I rolled the barrel behind him so he felt it if he backed up. He now was standing with his front feet in and his back feet outside the trailer. My helper was giving him small amounts of oats while I tapped on his hind fetlocks asking them to move. He was able to put his right hind in without putting weight on it as he did before. I tapped on his left hind fetlock and he hopped with out stepping into the trailer. Considering he had most of his weight on this foot it told me he really did not want to get in. I let him stand a few more minutes and tapped on his left hind again. This time he quietly stepped into the trailer and stood there. When I was sure he would stay in the trailer and not back out. We shut the door. He stood quiet in the trailer as they slowly drove away. Though this was not the ideal situation we were able to load him quietly and with him thinking as much as he could. At no time did we use force. It was HIS idea to get in the trailer when we eliminated all other options. The atmosphere was calm and patient. In fact it was quite boring to those who wanted to watch. All onlookers left before we finished. I had them stand far away from the trailer while they watched.

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The next time I would take my own X cavalletti with me to set up as a corral behind the trailer. I would take a barrel too. Using the same tools we used this time and every time I wanted to load the horse for as many as 30 to 50 more times. Once you find a way that works with a horse I would continue to use it. I would continue his training in lowering his head, in addition to using the leading positions as much as possible. Combining both setting up the situation to be successful with increasing his education, in addition to more positive trailering experiences, will all contribute to this horse becoming a good trailer loader. If possible a larger trailer to haul the horse in would also help because horses load better in bigger trailers.