

Safe Unloading

Teaching your horse to unload is an important step in trailering. Find out how to master this challenge with tips from clinician Chris Cox.

By Cynthia McFarland

Many people think that once they've taught their horses to load, their trailering worries are over.

Unfortunately, they're wrong.

Unloading is as much a part of trailering as getting the horse into the trailer in the first place.

Horses are creatures of habit and tend to repeat what they learn in their first trailering episode. If you let a horse rush backward or leap out of the trailer in the beginning, he's going to think this is the way to unload every time. Hurried or sloppy unloading can lead to accidents and injuries. Your horse can bang into the sides of the trailer, hit his head or even slip off the trailer or ramp and injure himself.

"The key is to teach your horse to unload slowly and quietly from the very first time he gets into a trailer. The way he unloads in the beginning is how he will always try to do it in the future, so your goal is to have him relaxed and listening to you," explains horseman and clinician Chris Cox.

Some trainers walk a horse out of the trailer, but Cox prefers to back the horse out because it is safer for both horse and handler. Make sure your horse is well-versed in backing up before you ever load him.

To back the horse out of the trailer, you want to walk into the trailer beside him, making sure he sees you and knows you are there. Standing at the horse's shoulder, cue him to move backward. Encourage him to step all the way out and not jump back into the trailer.

If he unloads quietly and slowly, stand still for a moment and reward him with a rub and kind words once he's out of the trailer. If he rushes, don't jerk or scold him. Just repeat the loading and unloading process until he gets the idea that you want him to go slowly. Maintain a relaxed and calm attitude, as the horse can easily pick up on your emotions.

If your horse bolts out of the trailer, it will take time and patience to reform him. The main thing is to practice loading and unloading when you don't have to go anywhere. If you're in a hurry, your high energy or anxiety will transfer to the horse.

Load the horse and let him stand in the trailer for a few minutes. Then ask him to back out, concentrating on slow and steady. Ideally, you shouldn't "bribe" your horse with feed when loading or unloading. However, if hanging a hay net in front of him helps him relax and unload more easily, there's nothing wrong with this tactic.

Sometimes horses unload quickly because they don't want to be left behind. If this is the case and you or a friend have another quiet horse, load that horse first. Unload the horse who wants to hurry first, so he realizes his buddy is still in the trailer and everything is fine.

Load and unload several times and make sure the last unloading is positive because this will stick in the horse's mind. Instead of immediately walking the horse away from the trailer, stand outside after unloading and let him relax for a few minutes. With practice and patience, your horse will get on and off the trailer like a pro.