

Safe Trailering

Follow these expert tips for safer trailering.

By Sharon Biggs

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It's easy to get complacent when hauling horses. Months or years of incident-free trips can give any driver a false sense of security. And while it's true that confidence is a good thing, a little bit of caution can go a long way, too. While you may have control over your driving, horses and vehicles, there is little you can do about bad drivers, traffic situations, road conditions and just plain bad luck. Therefore defensive driving, planning and preparation are key to safe hauling, no matter how long the journey.

Sharon Biggs is a dressage instructor based in England and the author of *In One Arena*.

"We believe you can never over-prepare for a trailering trip with your horse," says Mark Cole, managing member of the USRider Equestrian Motor Plan, the first nationwide roadside assistance program created especially for equestrians. "Even if you are only going to travel a short distance to a local event, an accident could occur ahead of you, leaving you and your horse unprepared and stranded in traffic for many hours."

Vehicle Maintenance

Essential Trailering Gear

- * A mobile phone
- * Information for emergency responders
- * Spare tire, properly inflated
- * Lug wrench
- * Trailer jack
- * Chocks
- * Reflective vest
- * Flares or emergency triangles
- * Flashlight
- * Water
- * Buckets and sponge
- * Pocket knife (to cut tangled lead ropes or hay nets)
- * A copy of the Nationwide Overnight Stabling Directory

- * A copy of The Next Exit, a guidebook that includes available services at each exit throughout America
- * Membership to a roadside assistance organization that will assist motorists with horse trailers
- * First-aid kit for horses

Your trip preparation should begin with proper maintenance on both vehicles. This is easy to remember with your towing vehicle, but not so easy to remember with your trailer. And according to Mark, this is where many people make their first mistake. "For the most part, trailers are used on an irregular basis. Therefore, maintenance issues can easily be forgotten and/or neglected." Have a qualified mechanic service your trailer at least once a year, whether you use it or not. There are so many components on a trailer that can decay as it sits. Rodents can chew through wiring, and floorboards can rot in places you can't see.

During the maintenance, ask the mechanic to examine the trailer lights, the emergency brake battery on the trailer tongue and the trailer brakes. Mark says that the ball bearings should be serviced every 12,000 miles or every 12 months. "Even if the trailer is not moved, moisture builds up in hubs and can cause bearing failure. The majority of disablements result from both flat tires and wheel bearing failure." Also have the suspension checked; check for corrosion under any rubber mats, whether the floor is metal or wood.

Replace tires that are five years or older, regardless of the condition. The majority of trailer tires rot before needing rotation, but if you travel a great deal, rotate your tires every 4,000 to 6,000 miles. Make sure that the tires you choose are trailer tires with proper ratings. Check with your trailer manufacturer if you are unsure. "Take care of your new tires by storing the trailer out of direct sunlight," Mark suggests. Always keep tires properly inflated. Incorrect pressure can and will cause a tire to blow.

24-Hour Countdown

Start by fueling up and checking the fluid levels in your towing vehicle the night before a trip. If it has been a few weeks since you last used your trailer, take a look at it and make sure that it is in good working order and that none of the light bulbs or electrical wires have broken. Inspect the tires, hitch, coupler, breakaway brake or kit battery and safety chains. Check to see if any bees or wasps have made their home inside the trailer. If you are borrowing or using a new trailer for the first time, make sure your hitch ball will be the right size for the trailer. Hitch the tow vehicle up and have a friend watch to make sure all the lights (turn signals, brakes and tail) turn on properly. Next, take a short drive around the block to test your brakes.

Loading Up

To make your hitching up and loading run smoothly, do things in the same order every time (do them in reverse order upon your return). For example:

1. Hitch the trailer.
2. Lock the hitch.
3. Connect the safety chains or cable to the towing vehicle.
4. Connect the battery cable on the tongue to the trailer hitch on the towing vehicle.
5. Connect the electrical plug.

This system will give you a mental checklist so that you won't have that sneaking feeling that you forgot something. Many people even carry a checklist in their tow vehicle that they can run through before they leave and when they unhitch.

Tomas Gimenez, DVM, is an expert in large-animal rescue and a professor at Clemson University in Clemson, S.C. He

says the best thing you can do for your horse to prevent injury is to always put shipping boots on him, even for short trips. "Nowadays there is no excuse not to use shipping boots," he says. "They are cheap, and it takes only two minutes to put them on. By far the most common type of injuries during trailer accidents are lower leg injuries." In addition to shipping boots, Mark Cole also suggests equipping your horse with a head bumper.

Roadside Assistance

Although the American Automobile Association (AAA) is a great roadside assistance company, it is not set up to deal with livestock. If you have a breakdown, understand that AAA will not be able to change a tire on your trailer or tow it off the road. The only vehicle the company will service will be your towing vehicle. This may entail unhitching and leaving the trailer behind (a real no-no as we mentioned earlier). You will then have to call a friend or relative to come retrieve your horses.

So what is an equestrian motorist to do? USRider formed four years ago to fill the gap in the market. USRider treats every breakdown as if it's an 18-wheeler and has the ability to tow your vehicle and trailer off the road if need be. If the mechanic cannot start your car, the package offers free towing up to 100 miles. USRider will even help find stabling for your horses and lodging for you, and can refer veterinarians and farriers in the area you are traveling in. The coverage travels with you, whether you are in a friend's vehicle or your own. Membership also comes with personal accident insurance and personal excess equine liability insurance. Cost is minimal at only \$109 per year. Each year USRider donates a portion of its profits to organizations that provide large animal emergency response.

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Dr. Gimenez says that if a horse does not have to be tied in the trailer, you should

not tie him. “It is better for both safety and health reasons to allow the horse to move his head up and down,” he says. Hay bags are not a good idea because they can act as leg traps, Dr. Gimenez says. “If you want to give your horses hay, put it on the floor [non-manger type/walk-through designs] or in the manger. You can also soak the hay to dampen down loose particles, which helps keep the inside of the trailer dust free.”

If your horse is traveling with a companion, Mark Cole suggests keeping the offloaded horse within the loaded horse’s view when loading and unloading. This will keep both animals’ anxiety levels down and may prevent the loaded horse from bolting out of the trailer.

If your horse is traveling alone in a two-horse straight-load trailer he must be on the left side of the trailer. “By doing this, the weight of the horse will help keep the trailer toward the center of the road,” Dr. Gimenez says. “If the horse is on the right side of the trailer, it will help move the trailer off the road if you happen to lose control of it.” Mark Cole says there are increased incidents of trailer turnovers resulting from a single horse loaded on the right-hand side of a straight load.

Once you’ve loaded the horses, check your hitch setup again, make sure all doors are shut and that nothing has been left on top of the wheel wells.

On the Road

Defensive driving is the best policy, particularly when towing a trailer. Anticipate the unexpected, and do everything you can to avoid an accident. Mark suggests driving with your lights on, day and night, and driving at or slightly under the speed limit.

Because the horse cannot see in front of the trailer, he can’t anticipate and brace himself for any sudden changes. Aside from making sure you have a towing vehicle that can stop the trailer, Dr. Gimenez recommends always maintaining a safe distance between you and the vehicle in front of you. “Even if other drivers keep cutting in front of you—which they will—keep maintaining a safe distance.”

“Remember it takes longer for you to stop,” Mark adds. “A simple rule of thumb is to allow a minimum of one vehicle length [the length of your truck and trailer combined] for every 10 miles per hour you are traveling. If using the two-second rule, double that to four seconds. In the hurried world we live in this is sometimes difficult to do, but this extra cushion could save your life or your horse’s life in the event of a sudden stop.” Pay close attention to all road signs, and stop and cross carefully at all railroad crossings. Know how tall your trailer is, and take heed of high-profile-vehicle notices on low bridges, fast-food drive-thrus, et cetera.

If the Unexpected Happens

In the event of an emergency, get to the side of the road as quickly as possible. Get as far off the road as you can, even on to the grass verge. “The most common cause of deaths on the road is being run over by passing traffic,” Dr. Gimenez says, so carefully put out flares or warning triangles to alert other drivers, and turn on your hazard lights. Leave your horses on the trailer and never offload them onto the side of the road—a potential disaster if one should break loose and run out into traffic. Mark Cole also warns against unhitching the truck from the trailer—a dangerous situation, even on level ground. The trailer is uncontrollable and unsteady when separated from its tow vehicle.

If a flat tire has caused the emergency, maintain a safe speed as best you can. “In other words, don’t create an accident by making a sudden stop or reducing your speed too quickly,” Mark says. Sacrifice the tire and wheel, and continue driving until you can leave the motorway and find a service station or safe place to stop. “The safety of you and your horse is more important than a wheel or tire,” he says. “We also don’t recommend changing the tire yourself unless you are qualified. Changing the tire on a trailer is a potentially lethal situation. A loaded trailer is extremely heavy. The weight shift can cause the trailer to fall off the jack. Also, the lug nuts need to be torqued to a proper sequence because otherwise the tire can come off in transit.” If you have no other alternative, a trailer jack that allows you to drive the trailer up onto it and off the ground will be the safest alternative. Try to get someone who is experienced with changing tires to

do this. If you have to do it yourself, have a qualified mechanic properly torque the wheel immediately.

Although your mind may be on the competition or destination ahead of you, try to make an effort to concentrate on getting to the event safely. "It is very easy to get caught up in the moment of an event or competition," Mark says. Trailering requires a different, or at least enhanced, state of mind from that of simply driving a car. So plan ahead, be aware, hang up the cell phone and pay attention.

* This article first appeared in the April 2005 issue of Horse Illustrated.
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