





Happy travels

Waikato trainer Russell Higgins shares his advice for safe and happy float travelling this summer

If we own horses, for most of us there will be a time when we are going to need to transport them somewhere. And you don't have to be in the horse world for long to have come across a horse that just doesn't want to load into a float. It's one of the most common situations that people ask for my help with.

Over the next two issues, I will share some of the practices that I have when loading and travelling my own horses.

I have had many comments over the years from people who have seen me around the country; service station attendants who didn't think I had horses in my float because they couldn't hear them moving around or pawing when I was re-fuelling, people who watch my horses unload quietly, people who saw how confident I was that my horses would load, even in a situation that wasn't ideal, and the most common comment I hear: "You're so lucky..."

Well, it's true, given all the dumb things I've done and all the miles I've travelled with horses by land and by sea, I have been lucky.

I've also had some real-life learning experiences, twice had a wheel come off the float I was towing, one trailer fire and one towing vehicle fire as well as many other interesting incidents. Each one helped me to learn something. The more I learn, the more I prepare, and the more I prepare, the luckier I get.

My luck usually comes from a lot of concentrated effort and work.

The more your horse wants to be in the float, the harder it is to put him off being in the float. There are a lot of situations and incidences, like the ones mentioned above, that will put a horse off, so my biggest suggestion is to not travel anywhere until he REALLY wants to be on that float and you've had several sessions that have reinforced to your horse that the float is a good place to be and everything is okay when he's on there. I'm sure we've all heard stories of horses that have been sent out of their stables because the barn is on fire only to turn around and run back to their stable,



ABOVE Get your horse used to loading in different places
MIDDLE Travel a single horse on the right-hand side of the float
RIGHT Don't be in a hurry to unload



to their sad deaths. In a state of confusion and fear a horse will go back to its last place of safety and comfort.

A very common thing that I hear is “my horse loads fine but then rushes out”, and it’s true the horse does load fine, but remember, horses are only trying to be safe and seek comfort, both physical and mental comfort.

One of the best ways to tell how a horse feels about being in a float is to watch how they’re coming out. You don’t want them to be any more enthusiastic about coming out than they were about going in. If this is your problem, then you can look forward to next month’s article looking at float loading in detail, which sets the horse up to think his way forwards into the float.

Here are some tips to help things get a lot better with your loading and travelling:

Before closing the ramp

Load your horse into your float in different places. Horses aren’t good at generalising their learning, and you need them to do this to load successfully in different situations.

After you’re happy that you’ve had several good sessions where your horse has loaded calmly, confidently and positively, turn the float around 180 degrees and load him a time or two

facing this new direction; more if it’s hard for him. Move your float to a different paddock, driveway or part of the property and have him load another time or two. The aim is to get to where the location of the float has no bearing on the quality of his loading.

Doing this is one thing that can save you a lot of delays in loading your horse in the future. The ultimate is a horse who loads anywhere, anytime, in any float – you just need to ask.

For a green horse before his first trip:

Practise closing and opening the ramp behind them without going anywhere; repeat it several times. Then unload, take a short break of a minute or two then load up, and don’t shut the ramp. This way you finish with something easier than what you are working on.

The first trip

Leave your property, drive around the block (or even drive around your own property if it’s big enough to go on a short trip) and return home. By doing this, you are not adding the stress of arriving at a new environment and having to deal with that.

After you’ve unloaded, load him up again, several times if that’s what is needed for him to be loading and standing calmly again. Finish with something easier than he’s just done: ie. load him on again, don’t shut the ramp, then off-load him.

To tie or not to tie: There are situations where either of these practices would be the right thing to do, and there are situations where both would be the wrong thing to do. Don’t be fooled, there is no 100% safe way to lock a horse in a box and tow it at high speeds amongst



MORE TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Make sure your horse can load on both sides of the float. Mostly, he will travel on one side, but take the time occasionally to load him on the other side. I've seen things go very wrong with horses who have only ever loaded and travelled on one side.
- If loading two horses to travel together, and you know one doesn't load well, you will get better results if you take the time to load the more difficult one first, until that is working well, then remove that horse, load the easy horse, then load the more difficult horse again. I've seen it done the other way a lot. One horse stands in the float while people do what

they can to load the difficult horse, there's crashing, banging, the float is rocked from side to side and the loaded horse feels the pressure that is meant for the other horse. The result: you now have two horses who hate the float!

- If loading one horse, load them on the right-hand side, as due to the camber of the roads it makes the float more stable than if you load them on the left. Also, the road is usually (but unfortunately, not always) smoother towards the centre
- If loading two horses, load the heavier horse on the right-hand side, for the same reason as above.



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