

Training With Josh Nichol

Trailer Loading Simplified

With Josh Nichol
By Chantal Marleau



JESSIE CONGDON PHOTOS

The secret to successful trailer loading is to focus on loading the mind, not the body.

At some point, you have probably experienced one of the moments all equestrians fear most: that day when truck and trailer are packed and ready but the one thing missing for the adventure is your horse. You've probably been engaged in a mental battle that either took hours to resolve or saw you finally surrender and never reach your destination. Worse yet, you may have found yourselves miles from home and unable to return.

The idea that horses, prey animals who need to monitor their surroundings for survival, would willingly consent to being locked into a dark, moving cave is improbable at best. Confinement in a trailer is apt to set off every evolutionary alarm in your horse's mind and body.

It really does not matter how comfortable or fancy your rig is. Horses do not enjoy low roofs over their heads. Balancing through turns and enduring the noise of highway traffic don't help build a convincing argument in favour of trailering, either.

The reality is that almost all horses need to travel at one time or another. If your horse is unable to do this confidently and consistently, his refusal to load also has the potential to escalate into a safety hazard.

In this article, trainer and clinician Josh Nichol explains why horses often react negatively to trailers and provides key exercises that will help you and your horse develop a more confident approach to trailer loading.

Loading the Mind

When it comes to training horses, key concepts always remain the same. It's the progression in the questions we ask that differs.

In the case of asking a horse to get into a trailer the question is simply, "can you go softly forward into this box?" Given the unnatural environment of this box and the understandable fear it might trigger, the answer is often a resounding, "No way!"

"Resistance always starts in the mind," says Nichol. "The secret to having a horse load confidently is to focus on getting his mind onto



the trailer, not his body.

"Once a horse is on the trailer mentally, getting the body to follow will be much easier."

The lead-rope is the tool that, in keeping with Nichol's training techniques, provides a direct link to the horse's mind and will help dissipate his anxiety.

Releasing Tension through the Lead-Rope

"If you can feel tension in the lead-rope when you slide your hand down from the halter, there is resistance caused by some worry in the mind," explains Nichol. "Before you can attempt to ask your horse an advanced question like, 'can you get on that trailer for me?', you need to make sure all his fears are gone and that he has learned to trust you unconditionally.

"The way to work through this tension is to use the lead-rope to address the resistance in the body which occurs because of anxiety in the mind," explains Nichol.

"Your goal is to teach your horse to follow, feel and yield to the lead-rope, not pull against it."

To begin this learning process, feel the tightness in the line and hold onto it as you wait for your horse to release.

As soon as you feel him yield ever so slightly, release and praise him. You will know this release has happened when you feel some slack in the rope and a more relaxed feel in your horse.

Continue working on this exercise until your horse releases consistently – once this happens, you are ready to move on.

The next step is to remove any tension in the lead-rope as you ask your horse to move forward.

“Bring the hand that is holding the lead-rope down a few inches and then forward as you take a step towards the trailer,” says Nichol. “Again, the goal is for your horse to yield to the tension in the line and move softly with you.”

Bracing and How to Deal with It

If your horse is committed to bracing against the lead-rope and you do not feel him trying to make a change, gently move your hand from side to side in a flowing motion. Wait for your horse to follow the movement of the lead-rope and/or yield to it slightly. Release as soon as you feel him try.

If, rather than yielding, you find that your horse’s objections build and he begins to raise his head, resist the temptation to force his head down by pulling. “If a horse brings his head up while I am trying to soften him, I simply follow his movement,” explains Nichol. “The last thing you want is to engage in a tug-of-war because that is one battle you are unlikely to win.

“Furthermore, if you start pulling against your horse, you are simply giving him something to brace against. In this scenario, your horse will learn that his release comes from bracing against you if his strength forces you to let go before he has

relaxed. It’s best to just gently hang in there and wait for your horse to yield to the rope.”

This is also true if the resistance escalates into a wide-eyed back up away from the trailer. “I sometimes see folks hang all of their weight onto the lead-rope in hopes that this will lower the horse’s head and make him more willing to go forward,” says Nichol. “The end result is typically a build-up in the brace and a losing battle for the handler.”

If you do find yourself in this situation, follow your horse’s movement to the best of your ability and try to encourage your horse to soften, even just a little, into the lead-rope so that you can then release on a positive attempt to yield. To help you do this, you will need to teach your horse to soften to pressure.

Thinking and Softening under Pressure

By its very nature, trailering is synonymous with heightened pressures for both horse and rider. There are often time constraints, the weather might be far from ideal and your horse may be asked to load into an unfamiliar trailer with horses he does not know. Of course, there’s also the sight of the ominous cave we discussed earlier.

To help your horse learn to think under pressure rather than flee, you will need something that can generate smaller, more controllable increments of pressure. Nichol finds that a flag – a crop or stick with a plastic bag attached to it – works well for this.

The idea is to feel the tension through the lead-rope, just as before, and then gently shake the flag until your horse relaxes and puts some slack back into the lead-rope. Build on this exercise by progressively shaking your flag more and more. Once the flag-shaking becomes easy for your horse to accept, bring the flag closer and closer to your horse’s body until you can touch him and have him remain relaxed.



Ask your horse to continue softening to the lead-rope as you ask him to approach the trailer. Gently shake your flag until he relaxes forward.

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Draw a line that leads up to the centre of the trailer's entrance. (Note the red line in this photo) The idea is to establish your personal space and to ensure that your horse remains on his side of the line. As you reach the entrance, your horse's mental focus should be inside the trailer as you continue to assert your space.

Every time your horse makes an effort to soften to the lead, stop whatever you are doing in order to provide a well-timed release. This technique will quickly begin to enhance the degree of yield you witness in your horse whenever he feels pressured.

"This ability to release and think into pressure is exactly what your horse needs when his mind is challenged by greater stresses such as loading onto a trailer," says Nichol.

Now, look for this yield to appear in every step that you take towards your goal. Softening to the lead-rope and relaxing in the face of pressure will always be the foundation of your success, whether it be stepping into a puddle, walking past a blowing tarp or onto a trailer.

In terms of trailering, however, you will know you have succeeded when you can lead your horse up to the entrance of the trailer and have him quietly wait there while softly looking inside.

"At that point, your horse is already mentally onboard," says Nichol. "It's really just a matter of having him work through getting his body organized to step onto the trailer and then forward again."

Defining Your Space

Horses communicate through their ability to direct one another's personal space.

Think of each horse being surrounded by an invisible energy bubble. The horse that is best able to press his own personal energy into the bubbles of his herd mates and cause them to move, leads the group.

For example, when your horse pushes into you and causes you to step back, you have just yielded your space to his and have thereby elected him leader. For this reason, always strive to clearly define the space that surrounds you and prevent your horse from stepping into it.

To practice this, clearly envision the outer limit of your own personal bubble and press it into your horse as you ask him to move out of your space. Aim to have him take a step or two backwards. Shake your flag and release as soon as he yields to your space and you feel his body flow away from yours.

In the context of trailering, Nichol suggests a specific exercise that will help you clearly define your space as you practice loading your horse.

First, use your boot to draw a line that leads up to the middle of your trailer's entrance. Remain on the left side of the line while ensuring that your horse stays on the right. He must never cross over to your side.

If, at any time, you feel your horse think about pushing into your side of the line, you will move him out of your space by

pressing your energy into his bubble. Shake your flag to once again support your intention.

"This idea of defining your space is especially crucial when you are leading a horse up to a confined environment like a trailer," explains Nichol. "You certainly don't want your horse spinning into you should he suddenly try to flee the pressure of the situation."

As you lead up to the entrance of the trailer, the idea is to keep both of you on your respective sides of the line. Once you get comfortable at clearly defining this space, remember that your horse's mind has to stay on his side of the line as well.

If your horse is allowed to nuzzle up to you while you practice this exercise, you have just allowed him into your space. Although this might be sweet when you are grooming him or saying goodnight, it's an altogether different story when you are training a vital skill like trailer loading. We've already discussed that a horse's body always follows his mind. A sudden desire to flee could easily result in him stepping onto you if his mental focus is already inside your personal bubble. For this very reason, always pressure your horse's head the moment it turns away from inside the trailer. As long as his focus stays inside, he will be inclined to remain exactly where he is.

Putting it all Together

The most difficult aspect of loading is that the heightened pressure will encourage your horse to test your leadership more frequently as you ask him to approach the trailer. This is his survival instinct kicking in.

To master trailer loading is to recognize the common struggles horses face and to remove them as they manifest themselves. Learn to feel all of the resistances your horse is presenting and patiently ask him to release them one by one. Meanwhile, keep your personal space bubble well engaged.

The Final Piece of the Puzzle

Apply all of the techniques we have described in this article as you now ask your horse to step into the trailer.

As you ask him forward, have your horse soften to the lead-rope. Again, use your flag until he steps-up softly forward.

Engage your space and pressure any part of your horse's body that is pressing into yours and keep the mind focused on the inside of the trailer. If he turns his gaze even slightly towards you, pressure that thought until he is looking straight ahead once again.

It might sound too simple, but it's true: once you are able to keep your horse truly focused on the inside of the trailer, you will both enjoy remarkable success and wonder why you ever struggled.

As you would with any exercise, practice these skills while you have the luxury of time on your side. Before you know it, your horse might surprise you and load himself! 🐾

Josh Nichol is a trainer and clinician who specializes in freeing the horse from resistance and helping riders better communicate with their equine partners. For more information on Josh Nichol's training methods and to view his clinic schedule, go to www.joshnichol.com