

ON THE ROAD:

TIPS FOR SAFE HORSE HAULING



Editor's note: As with any equine activity, we suggest you thoroughly research safety precautions before trailering your horse.

The foundation of good driving habits is a safe and properly rated rig. Whenever you take

your horses out on the road, whether for a short or a long trip, you are putting yourself and your horses at a certain amount of risk. Your combination doesn't have to be new, but it is very important that the trailer and vehicle are in good working condition and the tow vehicle is properly rated to tow the trailer and its load.

If you are towing a tag-a-long trailer, you must have a Class III or Class IV weight distribution hitch that is bolted to the frame of the tow vehicle. It must be rated to match or exceed the weight of your trailer. Whether you are towing a gooseneck or a tag-along, your trailer should be level, the brakes and lights must be working properly, the emergency breakaway brake must be attached, and the battery fully charged. Safety chains or cables must be hooked to the tow vehicle. Safety chains or cables are required for gooseneck trailers as well.

A horse that is well trained to load will be less likely to injure himself or others. Reward him for good behavior by good driving habits.

If trailering is new to you, practice driving the rig before you put a horse in the trailer. Know how to park and back up before you go out on the road.

If you are only hauling one horse in a two-horse straight load, put him on the driver's side of the trailer. If you are hauling more than one horse, put the heaviest one on the driver's side. Roads usually are crowned in the middle, so putting the heaviest part of the load on the higher side will help balance the trailer. Never put a horse backward in a trailer that is not designed for it; this will change the tongue weight and make driving very dangerous.

- Before you go on a trip, check and replenish engine fluid levels and wiper fluid of the tow vehicle.
- Check tire pressure in the tires of the tow vehicle and trailer. Improper or uneven tire pressure is responsible for most towing problems and low tire pressure often is the cause of tire failure.
- Make sure the ball on the tow vehicle is the correct size for the trailer. (This is especially important if you have different balls for several different trailers or you are using a new or borrowed trailer.)
- Make sure the rearview mirrors are properly adjusted and you know how to use them.
- Check lug nuts on the wheels. Wheel nuts and bolts should be torqued before first road use and after each wheel removal. Check periodically thereafter.
- Check inside the trailer for wasp nests and other hazards.
- Check over your hitch, coupler, breakaway brake battery, and safety chains. Make sure the brakes and all lights are working properly before you load the horses.
- When horses are loaded, make sure all doors are latched

properly and horses are comfortably tied. Untied horses can get stuck under bars or dividers, which could cause a broken neck or back.

- Take a cell phone with a fully charged battery or a CB radio with you.
- Before you drive onto the main road, get out and check over everything again. Something you overlooked may make itself apparent by then.
- If you happen to stop somewhere the rig has been left unattended, check everything all over again. Someone may have been tampering with the trailer or with the horses.
- Once you get out on the road, your driving requires some special precautions. The extra weight puts more strain on the tow vehicle. Stopping distances are longer and acceleration is slower. A good precaution is to drive at least 5 mph under the speed limit, keep a good distance behind the vehicle in front of you, and don't dart into traffic.
- When driving on multilane highways, change lanes gradually. Put your turn signals on before you change lanes so your intentions are clear to those behind and next to you. Use your rearview mirrors.
- Use a lower gear to travel up or down steep hills. On long uphill grades, downshift the transmission and slow to 45 mph or less to reduce the possibility of overheating.
- Be considerate of your equine passengers. Give the horse time to prepare for stops, don't accelerate quickly, and make sure the trailer has cleared the turn, has straightened out, and the horses have regained their balance before you return to normal speed. Travel over bumpy roads carefully.
- Frequently look at the trailer through the rearview mirror. Always be aware of what is going on behind you. It would be a good idea to turn the radio off and keep inside noise to a minimum so you can hear if anything is going wrong with the horses or the trailer. If you hear or feel *anything* out of the ordinary, pull over, stop, and check it out. It could be the start of something very serious.

There are some other precautions you can take to help you avoid trouble while you are traveling with your horse.

- Take care of yourself first. Keep a human emergency kit in your vehicle and make sure you have identification, insurance papers, and license and registration papers. Realize that if you were in an accident and incapacitated, the emergency personnel and police most likely would not know how to deal with your horses. In a conspicuous place where it can be easily seen, post a list of people and telephone numbers who can be called to help. This list should consist of your veterinarian and friends or relatives. It always is a good idea to have someone with you when you travel with horses, and that person should be familiar with your rig if something should happen to you.

- Membership in a roadside emergency service plan is recommended, but most will not respond to those hauling horse trailers. US Rider Equestrian Motor Plan is a service that specializes in those traveling with horses. (usrider.org)

- If you are traveling interstate, carry current equine health certificates and proof of negative Coggins (EIA).

- Carry an equine emergency kit with a splint on board and know how to use it. Consider extra water as part of the emergency kit; not only for drinking, because horses are more likely to drink familiar water from home, but in an emergency situation you may need water for cleaning injuries or as a bath to cool off an overheated horse. You may need extra buckets in this case.

- Always use shipping boots or standing bandages to protect the horses' legs. A head bumper can reduce the chance of serious injury to the poll. Most injuries occur when loading or unloading, so this is important even on short trips. If you are hauling someone else's horse in your trailer, insist the horse wear protective bandages for your own protection against liability and agree in advance who will be responsible in the event of injury to the horse or damage to the trailer.

- Store these items in your trailer so you have them on board: Spare tire, jack, tire iron, three emergency triangles, flares, chocks, flashlight, electrical tape and duct tape, knife, water, buckets and sponge, spare halter and lead rope, spare bulbs, spare fuses, fire extinguisher, WD-40, broom, shovel, pitchfork, manure disposal bags, insect spray. (US Rider recommends carrying two spare tires because of the number of their claims where two tires have blown at one time.)

- During winter months these additional items may be necessary: Shovel, sand, red flag (for your antenna if stranded), horse blankets, human blankets, flashlight or candle and matches or lighter, tire chains.

- Keep these items in your tow vehicle: Registration for the vehicle and trailer, proof of insurance, jumper cables, spare tire, jack, tire iron, tool kit including wiring materials, spare belts and hoses, tow chain, cell phone or CB radio, replacement fuses, road atlas, work gloves, portable air compressor, cash or credit card.

No one wants to have an accident or to be stranded on the highway with horses in tow. Take precautions and be prepared for the worst, and you should be able to handle any of those unexpected developments that life hands out! ■

*Neva Kittrell Scheve and Tom Scheve own the Equispirit Horse Trailer Company in Southern Pines, North Carolina. You contact them at equispirit.com, (877) 575-1771. For further reading on the subject, check out *The Complete Guide to Buying, Maintaining, and Servicing a Horse Trailer* by Neva Kittrell Scheve, and *The Hawkins Guide: Equine Emergencies on the Road*, by James Hamilton, DVM and Neva Kittrell Scheve.*