

Trailer Tips

From Kate Navarra, Stablemanagement.com, October 2017

Driving a horse trailer is significantly different than driving a passenger vehicle or sports car down the road. As a horse transporter, you have the responsibility to make sure the trip is safe and comfortable for the horses in tow as well as for the other vehicles on the road.

We spoke with Brad Heath, owner of Double D Trailers in North Carolina, for trailer driving tips. His advice comes from the company's blog "10 Tips for Safe Driving With Your Horse Trailer and Tow Vehicle before you GO." From the blog, we've highlighted a few tips to get you started. (Entire Blog attached after the summary).

Pre-Trip Inspection

Just like you see airline pilots walking around their planes before taking off, you should take the time to conduct a pre-trip inspection. Society's fast pace can make it tempting to skip this step to save five minutes, but those five minutes might save your or your horse.

After you hitch your trailer, make sure that your hitch pin is in, your safety chains are attached, your jack stand is raised all the way up and your tailgate is closed. Check the lights, the brakes and the tires to make sure that all are in working order. Walk around the outside of the trailer and ensure that nothing has broken or been damaged since your last trip. Look carefully at the trailer's interior to ensure that it is clean and "wasp-free" before loading horses.

On the Road

A truck and trailer do not handle the same as a smaller vehicle. The weight of the trailer means you'll need more stopping distance and acceleration time. Even though the trailer tires follow in the truck's path, wider turns are necessary.

"Don't be bullied into going faster by the traffic behind you," Heath said. "Find a safe place to pull over so cars can pass if a long line develops behind you." Make sure your mirrors are adjusted so that you can see down the side of your trailer and to the traffic behind you.

Attention

Distracted driving is all too common on any roads and is especially dangerous on narrow country roads. The best way to ensure a safe trip is to pay attention to other drivers and to your trailer at all times.

"Check using your mirrors, keep the radio low and be on alert for any funny sounds or shakes transferred up to your tow vehicle," he said. "This may be an indication that your horse fell down or is in some other sort of distress."

Backing

Once you've arrived at your destination, you might have pull-thru access, or you might not. For some drivers, backing a horse trailer is nerve-wracking. Heath pointed out that it's simply because they haven't spent the time learning to do so. He shared a tip for learning to back your trailer.

"Put your hand on the bottom of the steering wheel to start. If you want the trailer to move to the left, move your hand to the left and vice versa. If you want to make sharp turns while backing, turn the steering wheel before you move the vehicle. If you want to make a more gradual turn, turn the steering wheel as the vehicle is moving," he noted in his blog.

Check Your Horse Trailer and Tow Vehicle Before You Go (Brad Heath, Double D trailers)

1. Check that your tow vehicle, hitch, and trailer are well matched and in good working order. It's very important to have a properly matched trailer, tow vehicle and hitch. A low rated hitch with a heavy trailer is only asking for disaster.

Next, check your truck and trailer. You can be the safest driver in the world but that won't keep you and your horse safe if your rig is a rusty bucket of bolts. Check for broken lights, a faulty emergency brake, damaged safety chains, weak flooring, rusted door latches, or anything else that would compromise the safety of you or your horse during travel.

2. Practice like your horse's life depends on it. Drive your trailer while it's unloaded to get a feel for turning, backing, stopping and starting. While you're at it, have a friend drive your trailer through a field with you in the back. Feeling the bumps from a horse's point of view will give you more appreciation of how your driving can affect their ability to balance.

Backing is one particular skill that may need some extra practice. Brad Heath, owner of Double D Trailers, recommends, "Get in a large open area without any obstructions (or anyone looking) and take your time to practice. Most folks panic when it comes to backing simply because they have never taken the time to learn in a non-pressured environment."

How to Prepare Your Horse Trailer for Travel

3. Use smart loading practices. Once you're confident that your rig is in good shape, it is time to actually load up and set out. Most roads are crowned in the center so it's a good idea to put the heaviest horse on the driver's side of a straight load horse trailer. This will help balance the load for even driving. For a slant load trailer, it's better to load the heaviest part of the load towards the front.

Load your trailer according to how it was designed. Orienting horses backwards in a trailer intended for forward facing horses will change the weight distribution and potentially cause problems. After you've driven a hundred yards, jump out of your truck to make one final check of your trailer and horses. Anything you missed during your loading process will usually make itself apparent during a short drive down the lane.

4. Pack all safety gear for you, your horse, and your vehicle. Driving a horse trailer is a good time to practice strong preparation. Take along a charged cell phone and first aid kits for you and your horse. Keep a clearly-displayed list of emergency contacts. If you are incapacitated during an accident, the emergency responders can use this list to contact your veterinarian or friends to help attend to your horses. Finally, pack any road safety items you may need like a spare tire, jack, tire iron, chocks, emergency triangles, flashlight, and flares.

How to Safely Drive With Your Horse Trailer

1. Visibility: See and Be Seen. It's important to have full visibility while driving your horse trailer. Adjust your mirrors so you can see your trailer's back end and check regularly while on the road. You might consider buying mirror extenders or "fish-eye" mirrors for your truck so you have the best view of what's going on behind you.

Drive with your low-beams on even during the day so that other drivers can clearly see you. Double D Trailers are equipped with brake lights high up on the rear of the trailer so that more motorists can see when you are braking and have plenty of time to react.

2. On the Road: Safe Horse Trailer Driving 101. The difference between driving a zippy sports car and a truck-trailer rig is immense. Allow extra stopping distance to account for the addition weight of your trailer pushing on the tow vehicle. Also, give yourself extra time to reach full speed when merging onto highways or pulling out onto roads to account for slower acceleration.

Note: your trailer's tire tracking so you have an idea how closely its tire path follows that of your tow vehicle. Make wider turns to clear barriers. Next, use a lower gear to drive up and down steep hills. Avoid parking on hills, but if you must, use wheel chocks to provide extra security.

Practice good sense by traveling a safe speed for the current road conditions. Don't be bullied into going faster by traffic behind you. If a long line develops, find a safe place to pull over so cars can pass. Brad added, "Horse trailers are equipped with trailer tires that carry a "ST" designation which stands for "special trailer". Most of those are rated at a maximum speed of 65 MPH. Keep speeds at 55 MPH on two lane roads and no more than 65 MPH on interstate travel."

3. Know how to deal with trailer sway. First off, a well-engineered trailer (with axles in the proper location) behind an adequately equipped tow vehicle should not sway to the point that correction is needed. However, if you are in the unfortunate circumstance of trailer sway, lift your foot off the gas pedal to slow down to a safe speed so the sway stops. If the sway is severe (fishtailing) you need to use the hand brake/slider bar on your electronic brake control system inside your tow vehicle to slow down and bring your ride to a stop. The inertia of the tow vehicle trying to move forward against the brakes of the trailer trying to stop should help straighten the sway as you apply the brakes.

Brad added, "Resist the urge to step on the tow vehicle's brakes....if you do this the inertia of the tow vehicle trying to stop with the trailer pushing forward will only increase the sway and could cause you to lose control." Afterwards, immediately take action to correct the problem by finding a new trailer, sway bars, better weight distribution, larger tow vehicle, or by reconfiguring the load.

For Your Horse: How to Safely Drive a Horse Trailer

1. Drive so your horse can balance. Your horse will be much happier if you drive in a manner that allows him to maintain balance while the trailer is in motion. Give him time to prepare for stops and don't accelerate too quickly. This way, he doesn't get jostled or thrown against the interior dividers. After a slow turn, straighten out and give your horse a chance to rebalance before accelerating. Travel carefully over bumpy roads
2. Be alert for odd shakes or sounds. Check using your mirrors, keep the radio low and be on alert for any funny sounds or shakes transferred up to your tow vehicle. This may be an indication that your horse fell down or is in some other sort of distress.
3. Be sure the interior of your trailer is comfortable for your horse. The type of trailer you purchase can also make a big difference on the comfort of your horse during travel.

Make sure the interior of the trailer is rattle-proof and well-insulated to provide comfort in hot and cold weather. Brad explained, "Most horse owners may not realize hauling a horse in a "non-insulated" trailer (single skin side wall) is one of the worst things you can do to a horse. Aside from the temperature variation, the trailers are extremely noisy with a lot of sheet metal vibration. So even when temperature isn't a concern in mild climates, the insulation is needed to dampen the vibration."

Driving a horse trailer on the road is not to be taken lightly. We hope that these ten tips set you well on your way to safe horse trailer driving for many years to come!