

Float Loading

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Taking a thorough approach to the education needed in preparing your horse for loading and travelling reduces the risk of injury to your horse and yourself by promoting safety through trust and clear understanding. To avoid the nightmare stories of float loading you will need to ask your horse to accept and understand different pressures, requiring a basic level of education – so don't make float loading their first education! Teaching them to understand different pressures on the ground will help you to position your horse precisely and smoothly in the float. With horse training, education is simply help. So no matter what you

are asking your horse, you need to approach it in a helpful manner. Some thoughts that I always have in my head to keep my judgement fair and consistent are: *What happened? Why? What's needed? & How can I help?*

Before loading, try to address these foundation points:

1) Soft leading & backing

It is very important that your horse understands how to soften and follow the lead rope. You want your horse calm and relaxed when the lead rope pressure tightens. You don't want them to brace and jump forward, so when you teach your horse to lead and understand pole pressure you should not use too much force – just regular repetitions that focus on forward thought and softness. If your horse can walk forward responsively and softly they should also be able to back up softly and calmly. If they are not comfortable backing, do a lot of it until your horse finds it easy.

2) Calm Standing

If you are not giving your horse a cue to do anything in particular, they should be very happy and able to just stand calmly. And you should have no problem handling any part of their body whilst standing. If your horse has very sensitive areas, or is still frightened of you when you stand in different positions around them, they will only be worse once they are compromised inside the float. Try to ask your horse to step forward a few steps, stand

calmly, then back some more steps and then from backwards walk forwards with no brace in the transition.

3) Moving Sideways

When you are inside a tight float in between a few horses, you need to know that your horse won't stiffen and lie against pressure. Horses are often nervous in a float and will brace, not wanting to move across easily, so the slightest resistance in sideways pressure may well be exacerbated inside a float. Aim to be able to get in close to your horse and move them across or sideways. You should be able to put your hand on their hip and gently ask them to step across softly. Their shoulders should respond similarly.

4) Send your horse past your shoulder

This is very similar to sending a horse out to lunge. If you ask your horse to step past your shoulder and go out in front of you, your horse should calmly walk past you on your cue. If your horse feels rushed or nervous, then you should repeat this until they have calm energy and show no sign of stress.



Prior Preparation: teaching to walk forward past me, off lead pressure.



5) Happy to move forward to breaching bars

Make sure your horse is calm with butt pressure and used to things touching them. Your horse has to be well handled from the top of its tail down to its back feet. Once your horse feels safe to a stick and to your hands I like to put a breaching rope on. It is simply just a looped rope which I use to apply controlled pressure to their butt. Once they are calm with the rope I like to

Your horse should be well handled from the top of its tail down to its back feet

back them a few steps and then gently pull the butt rope until they step forward. Repeat this until your horse is happy with the butt rope anywhere between the tail and the hocks and will calmly step forward, one step at a time and without fear.

Loading

Now that you have assessed that your horse has some degree of the above foundations, you are ready to start loading.

6) Approaching the float

I always park the float in an area where I can walk around both the float and the vehicle and where there is plenty of space to work. Firstly, if my horse is still frightened of the float's presence, I start from a distance and weave my way across from one side to the other, exposing each eye progressively and then two as you as you turn. I let my horse get closer without making an issue or forcing it – weaving my way in simply lets my horse get accustomed to a new object. Whilst I do this, I constantly test how they feel on the lead rope, taking out any little blocks that I find. This is the most crucial part – where I confidently lead and educate. At this point, your horse can learn to understand and follow your cues or block and ignore them.



7) At the ramp, reward any tries

Once I am close to the float, I may just walk past the ramp and let my horse stand to the side. I do this on each eye separately, then with both eyes simultaneously. Once my horse is beside the ramp, they may give it a sniff or a stomp. All curiosity should be allowed. When I am able to walk my horse around the float and around the vehicle and I feel that my horse is comfortable with being close to the float, I walk up inside the float a little bit, giving my horse some room and apply gentle pressure through the lead. I hold this gentle pressure and then give a vocal forward energy cue (I use a click). Maintaining the same pressure and the rhythmic click I give a tap with a dressage stick on its shoulder. If there are any tries in my horse, i.e. if they lean forward, tap the ramp or take a step, I stop all cues, giving my horse a release of pressure and let them rest. From this point on, I reward any tries in the same way.

8) Bracing

If my horse decides to brace and pulls back, I ask *What happened? Why? What's needed? & How can I help?* Generally a brace in a horse in this situation is due to fright or lack of foundation. If your horse has been leading softly up until this point, it is likely to be fright. Either way, you need to go back to leading lessons. Your horse may also need more time adjusting to the float.

To soften in the lead, I apply direct pressure through the lead to the halter and ask my horse to go past me. I can use a dressage stick or the lead rope on the shoulder to help encourage forward energy. Once my horse feels like they can send forward to the lead I test them by leading out in front to see if they brace. I also test my back up to make sure that backwards too is soft. Once my horse is responding and soft to all the cues, I just go back to the float and ask to see if they will come forward again.

Remember, it is not a lesson to make your horse uncomfortable away and comfortable at the float. You are only working on the areas where you feel resistance and as soon as you feel a try, and a softening in your horse, you need to reward with a softening in your education, no matter where you are in relation to the float. It is not good when we encourage our horses to seek refuge from us and our education.

9) Teach your horse to back off as soon as they step on

Once my horse is stepping up on the ramp, I like to teach them to back off before I teach them to load.

Once my horse puts one foot on, I might back them up and repeat it a few times until it is easy for my horse. Then I might get my horse to go on 3 steps and get them to back off again, then on again and stand for a bit. I repeat this until eventually my horse is all the way in the float. By doing the lesson like this, my horse can not only take nice forward steps doing one step at a time as I ask for them, but they can also take the same soft backward steps, one at a time. In between, when I stop cue's, I have made sure that I have stood my horse until they are calm and relaxed. At the start some horses need more time than others to adjust between tries.

Just remember, if a horse has grown up around buildings, stables or cars, floating may seem less of a threat than a horse that has only grown up with bush and open spaces. Acknowledge your horse's background, and give them the preparation and time they need to adjust to your objects of travel unreservedly.



First loading lesson for this young gelding. Standing both inside and outside and anywhere in between of float is very important. Exiting forwards was necessitated by the ramp steepness.

Let them stand until you start to see some signs of relaxing: look for softening ears, softening eyes, a lick or a chew etc.

After this is established I put my horse in reverse and ask for forward repeatedly, simulating my horse stepping back and the lead tightening as it would in a straight load float.

By the time I have loaded a horse they have stood, walked forward and walked back on every part of the float. There is no such thing as 'in' or 'out' because all I have done is ask for forward then stand, ask for back then stand, regardless of where my horse is in or partly out of, the float.

10) Rub them all over

During this in and out process and whilst my horse is standing, I like to move around and stand at the back of them, handle their tail, rub their hind and back legs, getting them familiar with me close to them and all over them both in and out of the float. It is best to rub them down like this only when they are calm.

11) Backing off

Once my horse has engaged the float and has been fully inside, and is ready to be backed off, I still stop on the way out and ask for a few forward steps and I make a habit of doing it more than the first few trips. I like to keep my horses focused with me, pliable and ready to move as I ask – not predicting whether they should be in or out. You never know when the situation may change – imagine a child suddenly running out behind the float with your horse locked in reverse.

If you spend time on these processes, by the time your horse is in the float, they are very comfortable with the floor and are very happy to stand and move around in the float. This is very important to your horse's mental stability for travelling. Your horse needs to feel that they know the float; that they are able to move a little and that the floor is safe. A horse can freeze in a float and not back off because of anxiety about floor sturdiness.

Regardless of whether I am loading in an angle load or a straight load float, I always teach my horses to back off and where I can, to walk forward off calmly. You never know what float they may end up getting on and this trust based skill for both directions is a useful one.

Once you feel that your horse is happy standing on and in any part of the float, and can move calmly in and out, you can practise standing at the float ramp and asking your horse to walk ahead past your shoulder and into the float by themselves.

Tips

- This is not a speed lesson. It is about trust and consistency and safety. Take as much time as your horse needs to get it right.

- To practise and test leading and tying, I sometimes get a long lead rope (over 7m) and stand my horse some distance away from a rail, put the lead rope over the rail and walk off at an angle behind my horse before putting pressure on the rope and asking my horse to lead up to the rail.
- You can also lead your horse over ramps, through garden archways, in and out of sheds and other unusual objects, familiarising them with what you will be asking them to do in a float and practising overcoming any resistance – this is your chance to cement your role as leader.
- For your first few trips, after unloading ask your horse to walk straight back in, stand and then unload again.
- A small dark float will be more claustrophobic to a horse than one which has a big window at the front and which feels more open. Just because your horse loaded easily on one float doesn't necessarily guarantee they will on another. Horses will react very differently to floats which feel like a box.
- For certain horses, especially ones that have quite a strong separation anxiety, it is wise to travel with a calm companion for a while. Aim to wean them at some stage.
- Some horses need more room to spread their feet out; I have come across horses that travelling on their own with the centre bar to one side has no issues but travelling with the centre bar in place, leads to them scrambling with every pot hole and corner.
- For training use your normal halter but for floating stick to a good, strong, thick web-halter that will not cut/ rub/ break if they panic.
- Some rubber floors become slippery with urine and manure – just a small slip on a floor can panic a horse. Dry wood shavings may help.
- In straight load floats, tie up to the lower ring with enough slack so your horse is free to lower its head but short enough to prevent them from turning their head back or getting their nose behind the chest bar.
- Don't tie your horse until your breaching bars/ dividers are secured.
- Horses with limited handling are safer travelled in an open, cattle type truck. Leave floating until they have had more education.



Mark Langley will be coming to the UK in June 2014 to run horsemanship foundation clinics, demonstrations and private tuition. If you would like to organise a clinic or event get in touch now.