

# On The Road Again - Getting Your Horses to

by Angie DePuydt  
Photography by Cally Matherly

Inspections are right around the corner and most members have been carefully training and preparing their Friesians for months. One important aspect to consider is preparing your horses to load and travel well so that you can arrive at the Inspection safely. While older horses may be stalwart travelers, for many younger horses and foals, this will be their first long trailer ride. Careful planning and training prior to traveling, proper vehicle and trailer maintenance, and an emergency plan will ensure your Friesian arrives safely ready to perform at his best.

## PREPARING YOUR HORSE

Trailering is a necessary aspect of horse ownership for all of us. While many horses might rarely ever leave home, there is always the possibility of an emergency requiring a trip for veterinary care. Training your horse to load and unload safely and travel in a calm manner requires a deliberate effort in order to properly prepare your horse.

In fairness to your horse, you should begin training him for trailering several weeks or months in advance. Waiting until the last minute and placing demanding expectations on your horse to accept trailering is a recipe for disaster. For the more sensitive or inexperienced horse, trailering without proper training may be very stressful or traumatic, resulting in unsafe or undesirable behavior for years to come. Remember, horses are naturally prey animals and asking them to enter a dark, confined space is contrary to their nature so thoughtful training is the key to success.

Before you begin your training session, prepare your horse in proper ground manners, especially leading. Your horse should give to pressure, respect your space, and understand your cues to move forward and back up. If you have not committed time previously to training your horse in ground manners, you will likely be disappointed in your attempts to teach him to load and unload properly.

There are many professionals who provide instruction in safe trailer loading and there are many methods you can research. Two common methods are "sending", where the horse is trained to enter the trailer alone on cue, or "leading", where the handler walks the horse into the trailer. No single method is best and in each case you must consider your horse's disposition and training level. Whichever method of training you choose, keep these three goals in mind:





# Inspection Safely



The method should be safe for the handler.

The method should be safe for the horse.

The horse should be as calm after loading as before.

Do not neglect to emphasize safe unloading in your training. Whether you choose to back your horse off the trailer or turn him so he faces the exit prior to unloading, ensure your horse is calm and well in hand before you give him the cue to unload. Practicing this step thoroughly will help safeguard against a dangerous and potentially disastrous unloading upon arrival at the Inspection.

## OTHER TRAINING CONSIDERATIONS

There are a few other aspects to consider when conducting your trailer training. Choose a level and safe location to practice loading and unloading your horse. A level area free of obstacles with safe footing is very important. If possible, practice loading and unloading in the same location you will use when the time for travel comes. This will help create a familiar, safe space for your horse and reduce distractions.

Sometimes an extra set of hands can be very useful, so recruit assistance to assist you with things like closing the trailer door if needed. If your horse is very herd-bound, choose a location where he can see or hear his pasture mates to reduce unwanted stress. If your horse is especially sensitive, load a trusty companion who is comfortable with trailering next to him for reassurance.

Horses are creatures of habit and familiar settings and patterns are reassuring to them so try to load your horse during your training sessions using the same method and load him into the same spot on your trailer each time. As your horse becomes more experienced and comfortable, you can introduce different aspects of trailer loading and unloading to him.

The choice to tie a horse while trailering is a personal one. However, if you do opt to tie your horse, use a break-free device to tie him or use a break-away halter in the event that he panics or spooks. Also, be sure not to tie your horse before you have closed the divider and you are in a safe location. If your horse is tied and panics before the divider or trailer door has been secured, the result may be a desperate attempt to free himself and he could injure you or himself in the process.



Above all, be patient. Patience and timing are critical to any type of training. If you find yourself growing frustrated or impatient, take a break or revisit your training another day. If possible, always try to end your training session on a good note after you have accomplished something positive. Also, be sure to reinforce success when it occurs, no matter how small.

Lastly, make a few trial runs with your horse before you head out on your trip. The feeling of riding in a trailer, along with the some-times scary sights and sounds of the road should not be unfamiliar to your horse when you start out on a long distance trip. Trailer your horse, with or without a buddy for a few short trips to gauge his acceptance of the trailer and build his confidence.

Practice loading and unloading your mare and foal well in advance of traveling and consider taking a few short trailer rides to boost the pair's acceptance and confidence. You will also want to evaluate the configuration of your trailer to optimize space for your mare and foal and ensure safety.

You may choose to leave your mare loose or tied but never tie the foal. If you do tie your mare, ensure she has enough rope to balance herself and eat but not so much that the foal could be tangled in the rope. Foals should always be left loose so they can carry on their normal routine of resting and nursing. If you are concerned about your mare inadvertently stepping on her loose foal, be assured mares are incredibly adept at careful placement of their feet so as to not injure their foals.



## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR MARES TRAVELING WITH FOALS

If you will be trailering a mare with a foal, there are some additional planning and training considerations. As with older horses, you will certainly want to practice trailer loading and unloading well in advance of your travel day.

If your mare is a good loader and will calmly walk on to the trailer, her foal will usually follow but be prepared to provide him some assistance or encouragement. Younger foals will almost always follow the mare but an ornery or older foal might take more convincing. If this is the case, be sure your foal is properly halter trained and has well established leading habits.

In the event your mare refuses to load without her foal or is a nervous mother, it may encourage her if the foal is loaded first. This can be accomplished with the assistance of another handler while you hold the mare.

## BEFORE YOU HAUL

Several weeks in advance of your trip, conduct a thorough safety inspection of your vehicle and trailer and be sure to allot ample time for any needed repairs. An inspection can not only turn up minor problems before they require major or expensive repairs but it may also keep you from taking to the road with potential safety issues. Inspect your vehicle for typical maintenance issues, paying special attention to the brakes and tires. Inspect your trailer for the following:

- \*Check the flooring in your trailer for corrosion and weak spots. If you have wood floors, ensure the boards do not have rot damage and replace any questionable boards.
- \*Inspect your trailer hitch for cracks along the welding seams.
- \*Grease the hitch ball as needed.
- \*Ensure safety chains are in good repair.
- \*Inspect the trailer's interior surfaces for sharp edges or items



which might catch on your horse's lead rope or halter or injure them.

- Ensure all interior and exterior lights are in working condition.
- Inspect the trailer frame for cracks.
- Check for any loose wires, loose connections, or frayed wire covering.
- Inspect the trailer brakes, emergency break-away cable, pin and control box.
- Confirm the trailer tires have adequate tread and adjust tire pressure according the manufacturer's specifications.

Once you have inspected your vehicle and trailer, begin planning your route and complete your packing list. When developing your route, ensure you identify locations with heavy traffic, rough roads, or construction areas that may delay your arrival or place additional stress on your horse. If you know traffic or construction is unavoidable, consider adjusting your departure time so that your horse will not be standing on the trailer while stopped in traffic during the hottest time of day. Put thoughtful care into your route and select optimal locations for rest stops.

When packing, ensure you include any items you might need in the event of a medical emergency such as a first aid kit and emergency medical supplies for your horse. Place emergency supplies where they will be easily accessible in the event of an emergency. Ensure you have flares or safety triangles and the correct tire changing equipment for your vehicle and trailer. You may want to consider purchasing one of the numerous useful devices on the market which enable you to change a blown trailer tire without unloading your horse or using a tire

jack- this can be especially helpful if you are traveling alone or if you are inexperienced with changing a tire.

Be sure to bring contact information for any roadside service you are a member of. Also, do not forget the necessary travel documents for your horses such as health certificates and proof of Coggins.

Lastly, make preparations for assistance upon arrival if needed. If you are traveling alone with several horses, it may be helpful for you have a few extra sets of hands to assist you with unloading your horses as quickly and smoothly as possible. Contact your Inspection's Site Host, or reach out to other owners who may be able to provide you with assistance.

## ON THE ROAD

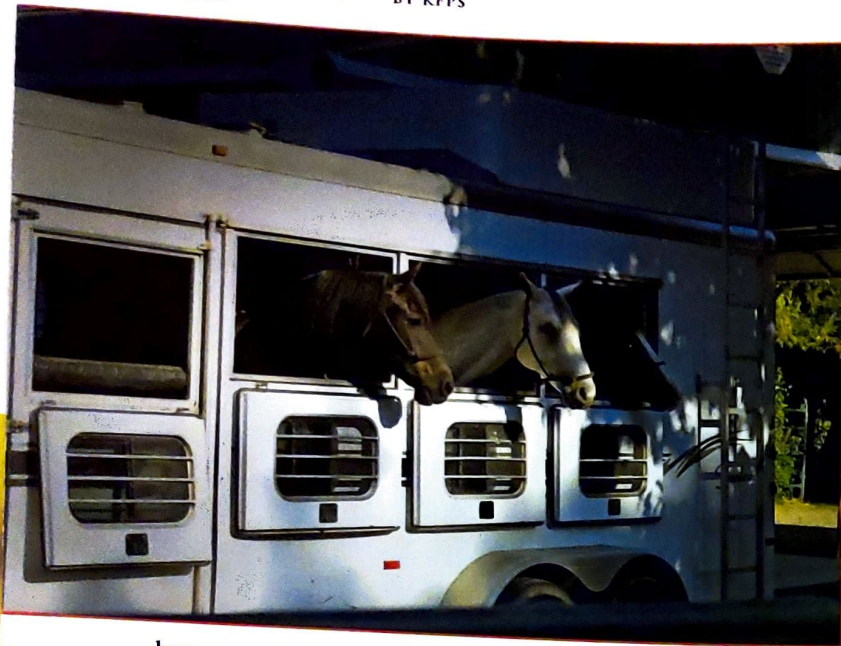
When your big travel day arrives you will have hopefully put the necessary effort into ensuring your horse is ready to load safely and calmly and your equipment is in good working order.

Some horse owners only feed hay while traveling and will opt not to offer their horse grain during the meal just prior to traveling, in an attempt to avoid travel or stress related digestive issues such as colic.

It is advisable to load your vehicle and pack your trailer first, loading your horses last so you can depart quickly and reduce any initial traveling anxiety your horse may have. If you happen to be hauling only one horse to inspection, load him in the first stall on a slant-load trailer so the greatest weight is closer to the trailer's hitch, placing less strain on the hitch and increasing stability. If you have a straight load trailer, it is best to load your horse on the roadside (left). This is important







because most roads are crowned in the center and placing the greatest weight closest to the center of the road will ensure better trailer stability.

It is typically advisable to stop every 3-4 hours to allow your horses to rest. During this time, check on your horse, offer him water, and top of his hay bag. Additionally, conduct a quick check to ensure there are no issues with your trailer's hitch, safety chains, or lights.

## EMERGENCIES

In the event that you have an emergency on the road, be prepared and know what to do. The most important thing is to get out of traffic as quickly and safely as possible.

Turn on your hazard lights and proceed with care to a safe location such as the far right shoulder of the road, off the street parking, or an exit ramp. Stay off grassy or medians regardless of how stable they look. If possible, exit the freeway completely. Stop your vehicle and trailer in a level location if possible so your horse can maintain his balance.

Turn off your engine and compose yourself. If you have been in an accident, call 911 prior to exiting your vehicle so emergency personnel can arrive on scene as quickly as possible. If you know or reasonably suspect your horse has been injured and will require medical assistance, be sure to notify the dispatcher you may require a Veterinarian on scene. Check your mirrors for oncoming traffic before you attempt to exit your vehicle. Upon exiting, step out carefully and stay as close to the side of your vehicle and trailer as possible if you are stopped in a high traffic area.

Leave your horse inside the trailer. Never attempt to unload your horse from the trailer on a busy highway- it's far too dangerous. Should your horse get loose, he could cause another accident.

In the event you have been involved in an accident and your horse is down in the trailer, do not attempt to enter or remove him from the trailer without the assistance of emergency

personnel or sedation if necessary. An injured horse may be under a great deal of stress and may panic if the trailer door is opened in an attempt to free himself, causing further injury. In the event your horse's break-away tie device did not release, check to ensure he can still breathe properly. If he cannot, disconnect or cut the break-away device to release his head and wait for emergency personnel to arrive.

Set up flares or safety triangles. Many states require you to set flares or safety triangles if you are stopped within five feet of the pavement's edge. Flares are typically more ideal than safety triangles as they provide better visibility from further distances, especially at night. They are also inexpensive, easy to store, and quick to set up.

Once you have addressed your emergency, take care getting back into traffic. Ensure you turn on all your lights, check your mirrors and carefully merge with traffic after building appropriate speed. Once you have reached the speed limit, turn off your hazard lights.

## CONCLUSION

After all the time and effort you have put into preparing your Friesian for the Inspection, don't neglect the necessary preparations to get him there safely. Ensuring your equipment is in good working order before setting off on your trip and knowing how to react in the event of a breakdown or emergency will reduce unnecessary travel stress for both you and your horse. If you haven't already begun preparing your horse to load and unload safely, start your training sessions as soon as possible. A horse who loads and travels calmly will be a more relaxed and well-rested horse who will be much more likely to perform his best for the judges.

**FHANA Education Committee: Tim Sherman, Angie DePuydt, Will Brón, Gerben Steenbeek, and Donna Kelley.**

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