

Logical Loading

Prepare your horse for trouble-free trailer loading with tips from trainers Tom and Margo Ball.

Article and Photographs by Heidi Nyland

You've seen it before. Perhaps you've even gotten into the act yourself. Owners push and pull, poke and prod, tempt and threaten, hoping to get their horses to load into a trailer. When the horses finally step in, the owners slam the door shut and dart for the truck cab, frazzled yet pleased with the result.

But what happens when it's time for the coerced horses to load again? Chances are the horses will remember the negative parts of the experience and be even more reluctant to load.

Champion Quarter Horse breeders and trainers Tom and Margo Ball, a brother-and-sister team from Fort Collins, Colo., have a successful trailer-loading system that begins well before a horse is ever led toward the awaiting trailer. Their proven methods, covered in this article, make loading a calm, easy process every time.

As the Balls see it, successful loading demands a mannerly horse, a calm and patient handler and the right environment. In other words, training and planning are key.

Once your horse knows his cues and your trailer is well-positioned, you'll apply the move-forward commands you used in the pen to load your horse with ease. "When your horse knows the commands, loading is no big deal—it's just like walking through a stall door," Tom says.

On Solid Ground

According to the Balls, before you can lead your horse to the trailer and expect him to step in willingly and responsively, you must train your horse to lead willingly and responsively in the



Follow the Balls' advice to help make loading stress-free.

open. To achieve this, Tom and Margo recommend teaching a series of move-forward cues from the ground. The horse gains a set of skills, and the handler gains confidence that the horse will obey the cues.

"You cause problems when you're nervous," Margo explains. "Your horse feels that. When you're ready to load, you want to think, 'I've worked with this horse, he responds well and this is going to be easy.' You want the horse to be relaxed, mannerly and quiet. Ground exercises will give your horse those traits and give you confidence to move to the trailer."

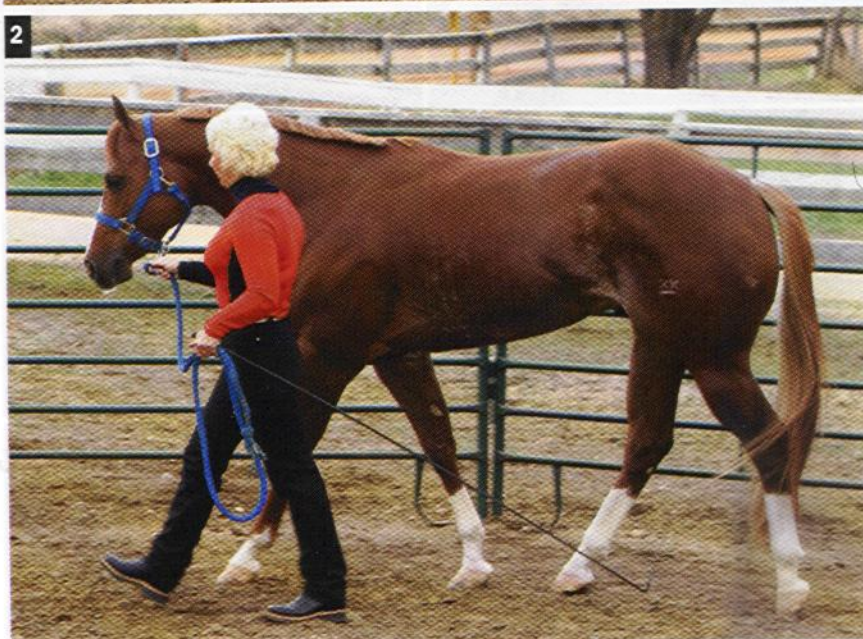
Margo says any horse will benefit from groundwork, even if he's had years of riding experience. Many riding horses, are quickly saddled and ridden, and seldom practice ground exercises. A few refresher lessons will make an older horse more responsive to ground-level commands.

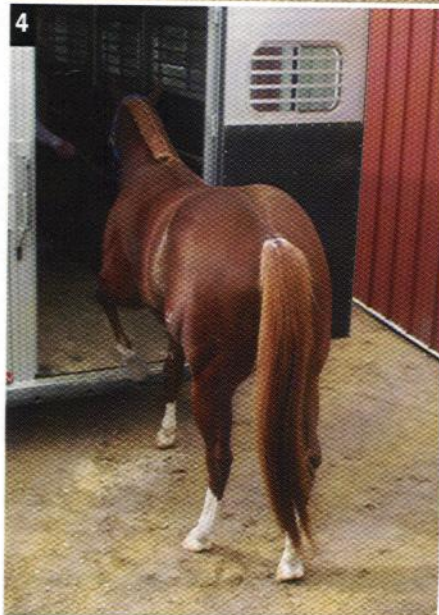
For a young horse, Margo suggests daily lessons at first, followed by every-other-day practice for a few weeks or until he seems cooperative. With any horse, she recommends starting with 10-minute increments.

"It doesn't take horses long to respond to your voice commands and to learn or regain ground manners," she maintains. "I want my horse to move forward easily. I want him to be respectful of my position—I don't want him in my space. If a horse doesn't have ground manners, I won't attempt loading lessons."

Margo's groundwork equipment, utilized in a round pen, includes a halter, lead rope and longe line, plus a whip that's

1. With your horse outfitted in a halter and lead rope, stand near your round pen or arena fence and ask him to go forward by clucking or saying "walk." If he doesn't move immediately, tap his hindquarters with the whip.
2. Make sure your horse moves at your speed. Notice Margo's position. She's in stride with her horse, in front of his shoulder, and her leading arm is relaxed but at the ready.
3. If your horse doesn't stop when asked, pull back, then release the lead rope. Next, ask him to back up a few steps, so that his shoulder is behind you as you start again.





1. Have patience. Allow your horse to sniff and place his foot on the trailer as he investigates, learns and calms down.

2. Make sure you're an arm's length ahead of your horse as you step up and verbally cue him to move forward.

3/4. Continue to walk forward while maintaining loose lead pressure. If your horse hesitates, verbally prompt him to move forward again.

5. If your horse stops and shows a little resistance (lifting his head or stopping for more than a moment), ask your partner to tap a stick near the horse's hindquarters. He'll hear the rhythmic cue.

6. If your horse still won't move forward, have your partner tap him gently on his hindquarters—in the same place he was tapped while working on the rail on the longe line.

long enough to reach the horse's hindquarters when Margo's standing at his shoulder. The whip is used to reinforce other cues, not to strike or intimidate the horse.

"When I give him a voice command—'walk,' let's say—and he doesn't respond, I tap him gently and take a step forward," she says. "Tapping reinforces the go-forward voice command. That's going to transfer to going forward into the trailer."

Margo first makes sure a horse starts and stops on command. She begins work beside the rail so that her horse learns to move in a straight line—a nec-

essary skill when he walks onto the trailer. The rail blocks his hindquarters from moving to the side.

"The rail also helps him learn to move forward without my having to apply pressure on the lead," the trainer explains. "He can only move ahead, as I want him to do, when it's time to load."

"Make sure you aren't pulling on your horse and holding him back from doing what you asked," she continues. "You want a little slack in the rope, so he has room to move forward."

To cue a horse to stop and stand still, Margo says "whoa." If he doesn't stop

right away, she backs him to show him the proper place to be.

"A lot of horses don't want to stop after they get going—that's common," she says. "With repetition and reinforcement, they learn what 'whoa' means."

Once Margo's horse masters starting and stopping on the rail at a walk, she repeats the exercises at the trot. Although she won't ask her horse to trot onto the trailer, she knows he's responsive and listening when he follows her commands at any speed.

When the horse is equally responsive at the faster gait, Margo moves

him to the middle of the ring, where she teaches him to follow her through turns without applying lead-rope pressure. She asks her horse to stop and start with voice commands as she leads him in small circles and frequently changes directions. Working on the rail helps the horse move straight ahead, but she also wants to know he'll follow her commands whether or not a fence is present.

To make sure her horse responds immediately, Margo uses her commands while working her horse on a longe line and uses her whip to tap him and reinforce her voice commands. She also taps the whip on the ground to propel him forward.

"I want him to move forward on command no matter where I stand," she says. "His movement on the longe line should be slow and relaxed. This isn't the place to race him around to get out energy. I keep my longe line collected and short so that I'm not holding on to the end of the line. I ask him to walk and trot, stop and start, repeating the movements we practiced on the rail."

According to Margo, a horse is ready to load when he's relaxed and calm during groundwork.

"Look for your horse to respond and respect your position," she advises. "Look at his eye—is it relaxed without

showing white? Look at his ear closest to you—is he paying attention to you by tipping it toward you? Make sure there's no resistance. If you feel as though you're fighting, don't go to the trailer. You and your horse must have a relaxed state of mind if you're going to be successful. If your horse respects you and listens in the pen, he should do the same when the trailer is present—as long as the trailer is set up in an appealing way."

Setting Up for Success

When it comes to an appealing trailer, the latter comment, Margo and Tom practice what they preach. At their facility, they installed fencing to create an alleyway for their trailer. Horses walk out the barn door and have no option but to move forward into the trailer. The sides are blocked, making the trailer look like a safe option for horses just learning to load. To sweeten the idea, the Balls cover the trailer floor with the same shavings used in their horses' stalls. They point out that other horsemen could adopt their plan by parking the trailer near a fence to create a loading alley.

"We set up for success," Margo explains. "We don't teach our horses to load in the wide open. They're boxed in and can't go anywhere but

Trailer-Loading Essentials

Lead rope. Snap on a cotton lead rope that won't burn your hands should your horse pull back. Tie your horse in the trailer with his lead rope and a quick-release knot.

Long whip. Choose a whip that reaches your horse's hindquarters while you stand at his shoulder.

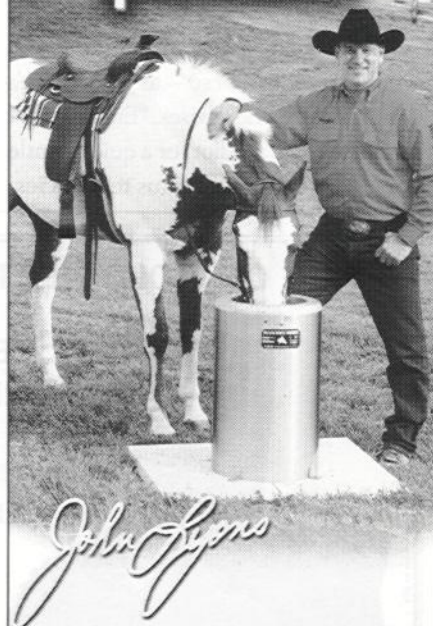
Longe line. Longeing your horse helps you know he responds to voice commands and moves forward easily.

A partner. Your partner handles the whip and stick as you load your horse.

Wooden stick. Tapping a broom handle on the ground cues your horse to go forward without touch.

Breakaway halter. Outfit your horse in a halter he can wear for training and trailering. A leather halter or a halter with a leather strap near its buckle will break and free your horse in case of an accident or fall.

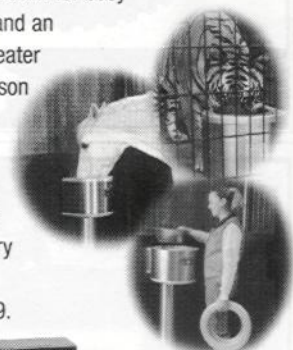
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When you do lead your horse to the trailer, says Tom, confidence is your first priority.

"Have confidence and treat him as you would an older horse — as though he's done it before," he advises. "Either I trust my horse to be an idiot, or a quiet, gentle horse." If you have anxious tendencies,

Tom jokingly recommends getting a cup of coffee and relaxing while your horse investigates his new surroundings.

"You'll split your time between the horse and the coffee and avoid the pressure to rush—you'll be careful not to spill your coffee."

To start, Tom asks a loading partner to stand by with a whip and wooden stick. As was true with groundwork,

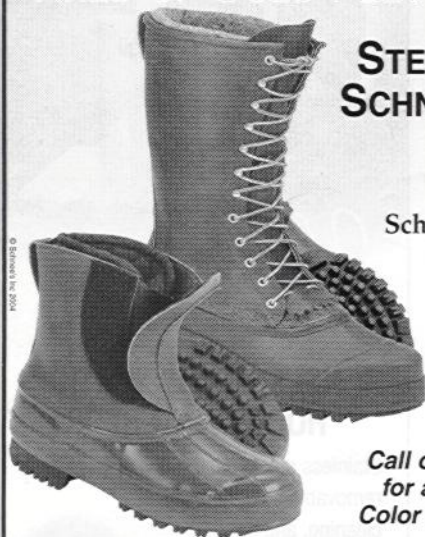
the whip's purpose is to reinforce verbal commands. Because Tom prefers to walk with his horses into the trailer, he asks a buddy to hold a whip or stick behind his horse — where the horse is accustomed to being cued. The horse will be prompted to move forward with sounds and tapping near his hindquarters.

The stick comes into play only if the horse shows resistance; Tom instructs his helper to tap the ground rhythmically, near the horse's hindquarters, as a further reinforcement of verbal cues. When the horse moves forward, the helper ceases making the repetitive sound.

Tom leads his horse close to the slant-load trailer and allows him to relax

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Tom and Margo Ball



At home in Fort Collins, Colo., brother and sister Tom and Margo Ball breed and train champion Quarter Horses at the family's Balls' Quarter Horses and Stallion Station. Breeding, showing and training horses is a longstanding family tradition. Margo holds five world-championship titles, as well as her American Quarter Horse Association judge's card. Her assignments have included the American Quarter Horse Association World Show and the All American Quarter Horse Congress.

Tom is the resident nutrition and breeding expert. He manages and stands three stallions, including AQHA world champion TNT Fluid Fred and halter champion Especially Skilled, the trailer-loading model for this article.

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