

## ***Tips for Transporting your new Mule or Donkey***

***By Amy K McLean, PhD***

One of the riskiest things you will ever do with your mule or donkey is placing it in a box on wheels! Horse trailers come in many designs from aluminum to steel including slant loads, box stalls or stock. Naturally, research has shown that horses prefer to ride in trailers or the “box on wheels” facing backwards. There are many reasons why an equine may prefer to ride with their face turned away from the line of travel. Research has also indicated that a horse’s heart rate will lower if the horse is allowed to travel with it’s head level to its shoulders and not tied any higher or lower. The reason why equines prefer to travel facing the back of the trailer and with their head level to their withers is based on comfort. If the head is tied or attached any higher then there potential risks for injury to the face especially the eye(s). Never travel with windows lowered allowing equine to hang their head out the wind and always travel with something protecting the eyes of an equine like using a fly mask.

It’s not uncommon for debris from the road to bounce up and into a trailer or hay from the hay bag can easily be blow into their face and cause irritation. The other reason for considering how the donkey or mule is tied is for respiratory reasons. When the head is tied to high and restricted then airflow through the nostrils and esophagus can be impaired thus leading to breathing problems and even contracting upper respiratory conditions. When an animal turns and faces backwards again their preferred position in a trailer according to several research trials, this allows the donkey or mule to travel at a comfortable and safe position, free of debris entering the trailer and hitting its face and the wind or air from hauling is not hitting the face or obstructing breathing, instead it will first contact the hips.

Other things that are very important to consider when hauling or shipping a donkey or mule is that you are working with a reputable equine transport business. There are many haulers available with multiple styles of “rigs” or transportation trailers. Mules and donkeys tend to do best when hauled in individual box stalls. This may cost more than shipping in a stock trailer in a group but is most safe for the animals. Again, look into who you are using as a hauler and find out about their reputation and if they have any experience hauling mules and donkeys. Mules and donkeys are not horses with big ears and due to behavioral differences not all haulers are suitable to haul these unique animals. For example, donkeys may take longer to load due to their high level of reasoning, so a hauler needs to be patient and considerate of this fact and not try and force or beat the donkey onto the trailer. Donkeys and mules may also be more cautious of ramps, so patience is a virtue when working with these animals to try and gently coax them up the ramp and onto the trailer.

When hauling mules, they should be hauled in individual boxes or slants and not together. This will protect your new mule from being injured from the other mule and avoid any contact that could lead to disease and or injury. Hauling can be very dangerous and even when a hauler is very careful, injury may still occur but use someone that has a good reputation because so you know your animal will receive the best care, this is not the place to cut costs! You have literally placed the animal in the care of someone for several days. It will be up to them to properly water and feed your animal. Most good haulers will stop on a regular schedule and will water each individual animal, will also provide hay to the animal (usually sent with the animal so there's no dietary changes) and on trips longer than 8-10 hours a reputable hauler will unload and allow the equine to move around some. It's very important to allow time off the trailer to make sure the animal can move around to prevent stocking up or edema in the legs as well as to allow the animal to urinate. Some equine especially mules can be somewhat opposed to urinating on the trailer. Time off the trailer also allows the animal's muscles to relax and time to consume more water. Many animals will not drink on the trailer. So, as an owner shipping a mule or donkey, ask the hauler how often they stop and what they do with the animals when they stop. Again, a reputable hauler that's been in the business, will have stops planned along the route and a routine for when they stop for each animal and will gladly share this information with you.

Other things to consider when shipping is the equipment needed to ship the donkey or mule. If a hauler is using a very open or stock type trailer, request that a fly mask is used to prevent debris from entering the eye. All eye injuries should be treated as emergencies and if any injury or problem occurs in route, instruct your hauler to seek immediate medical care. In addition, consider having insurance on your animals both major medical and mortality before the mule or donkey ever leaves the sellers, trainers or begins it's journey with the hauler. Accidents do happen but it's best to have your animal covered and that you have communicated again with a reputable person that understands the nature of mules and donkeys and will properly place them in secure places on the trailer and allow time for water and for being off the trailer. Also, make sure your equine is up to date on all of its vaccines. It's best that the mule or donkey has had its core vaccines at least 30 days prior to traveling. Core vaccines would include tetanus (toxoid), Eastern and Western Equine encephalomyelitis (EEE and WEE), influenza, and equine herpes virus. If your animal should arrive with any abnormal condition contact all parties immediately (i.e. hauler, seller, trainer, and veterinarian).

For the best luck when hauling and selecting a hauler use a hauler that the individual farm or ranch has a good history with and this will help ensure your animal arrives safe and sound on the box with wheels!

***Additional Information on Scientific Studies looking at transporting and hauling equine.***

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**Papers and Articles**

**Effects of transporting horses facing either forwards or backwards on their behaviour and heart rate**

. N. K. Waran, BSc, PhD<sup>1</sup>, V. Robertson<sup>2</sup>, D. Cuddeford, BSc, MSc, PhD<sup>2</sup>, A. Kokoszko, BA, MSc<sup>3</sup> and D. J. Marlin, BSc, PhD<sup>3</sup>

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Author Affiliations

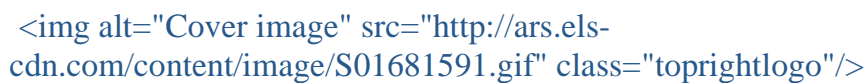
- . <sup>1</sup> Institute of Ecology and Resource Management, University of Edinburgh, School of Agriculture, West Mains Road, Edinburgh EH9 3JG
- . <sup>2</sup> Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh, Summerhall, Edinburgh EH9 1QH
- . <sup>3</sup> Department of Physiology, Animal Health Trust, Balaton Lodge, Newmarket, Suffolk CB8 7DW

**Abstract**


The effects of transporting horses facing either forwards or backwards were compared by transporting six thoroughbred horses in pairs in a lorry on one journey facing in the direction of travel, and on another journey facing away from the direction of travel, over a standard one-hour route. Heart rate monitors were used to record their heart rate before, during and after the journey and the horses' behaviour was recorded by scan sampling each horse every other minute. The average heart rate was significantly lower ( $P < 0.05$ ) when the horses were transported facing backwards, and they also tended to rest on their rumps more ( $P = 0.059$ ). In the forward-facing position, the horses moved more frequently ( $P < 0.05$ ) and tended to hold their necks in a higher than normal position and to vocalise more frequently ( $P = 0.059$ ). During loading the average peak heart rate was 38 bpm lower ( $P < 0.05$ ) when the horses were backed into the horse box for rear-facing transport than when they were loaded facing forwards. However, there was no difference between transport facing forwards or backwards in terms of the peak unloading heart rate, or the average heart rate during loading or unloading. The horses seemed to find being transported less physically stressful when they were facing backwards than when they were facing forwards.

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## The effect of orientation during trailer transport on heart rate, cortisol and balance in horses ☆

Diana K. Clark<sup>1</sup>, Ted H. Friend  <http://origin-cdn.els-cdn.com/sd/entities/REcor.gif> >, Gisela Dellmeier<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

Sixteen same-sex pairs of Quarter Horse and Quarter Horse-cross yearlings (eight pairs during each of two trials, 1 year apart) were transported for  $17.8 \pm 0.52$  min over a standard course with one horse facing in the direction of travel and one facing the opposite direction. The orientation of the horses in each trial was alternated with respect to the side of the trailer (float). Heart rates were monitored continuously using a

strip chart recorder and were determined for the following events during each trip: (1) after the horses were loaded, but just prior to beginning the trip; (2) immediately after the initial movement of the trailer; (3) during travel over smooth roads near the start and near the end of the trip; (4) before and after an abrupt stop; (5) the mean for the entire trip. During the second trial, plasma concentrations of cortisol and thyroxine ( $T_4$ ) were determined in blood samples taken via jugular puncture in the holding paddock prior to any handling beyond catching, in the trailer prior to hauling and in the trailer immediately after the trip. Observers riding inside the trailer recorded how often the horses impacted the sides and ends of the trailer, lost their balance, pawed, vocalized or defecated. Rear facing horses had fewer side and total impacts and losses of balance ( $P < 0.05$ ), and thus were better able to maintain their balance during trailering. Orientation, side of trailer and gender had no significant effect on any of the heart rates or log transformations of hormone concentrations; however, trailering increased cortisol ( $P < 0.005$ ) and heart rates ( $P < 0.001$ ) overall. All horses' heart rates gradually decreased during the course of the trip. The general stress response elicited by trailering may have masked any treatment effects on heart rate and cortisol. Having horses face away from the direction of travel appears advantageous because of their improved ability to maintain their balance.

## Keywords

. Transport; Stress; Physiology; Horses

