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Hitch Up & GO

*Expert Guide to
Horse Trailers &
Safe Trailering*

Experts
Share their Top
Tips on Trailer
Buying, Training,
On-the-Road Safety,
and Equine
Travel

*Edited by
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AN AIM EQUINE NETWORK AND USRIDER® PUBLICATION

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Expert Guide to Horse Trailers & Safe Trailering

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Trailer-Safety Checklist

You've done everything right. Your trailer is large, airy, comfortable, and well-balanced. Your horse loads willingly and hauls without a fuss.

Your tow vehicle has a solid truck chassis and an excellent towing package, and you've installed a weight-distribution hitch. You should be ready to head down the road, right?

Almost. Before you leave, there are some things you should check every single time. Take a few moments to walk around your rig, and take a last, hard look.

■ **Hardware.** Check your hardware for smooth function and for cracks. Check everything from windows and walk-through doors to the rear doors and ramp. *Tip:* Regularly lubricate hinges and latches to keep them from "freezing" in one position, and to extend their lifespan.

■ **Wheels/tires.** Your trailer tires should be in good shape, and that goes for both tread and sidewalls. Check the spare tire, too, in both your tow vehicle and trailer. Keep all tires fully inflated. Make sure that all the wheels' lug nuts are tight. *Tip:* Repack your wheel bearings at least yearly — more often, if your trailer sees a lot of use.

■ **Hitch.** Be sure that the hitch is on, and that the socket (if it's a bumper-pull) is closed and locked over the ball. The hitch collar should slide easily and close completely over the ball. If the lock pin is missing, replace it. The ball should be no smaller than two inches and might

be larger. While you're looking at the hitch, be sure all the bolts are tight and undamaged.

■ **Safety chains.** Safety chains should be crossed and hooked to the *frame* of the tow vehicle. Be sure they're solid and heavy, with every link in good condition — they'll need to hold the trailer in an emergency. Your rig is only as strong as its weakest link. The truck frame, hitch, draw bar, ball, chains, and trailer frame all must be able to handle the load.

■ **Brakes.** Check the trailer brakes and your brake controller. Some trailers have their own braking system; some don't. If yours doesn't, keep in mind that your tow vehicle is providing all of the stopping power for both your tow vehicle and your trailer; be especially careful to avoid any sudden stop that could cause your trailer to jackknife. Do you have breakaway brakes? Check that the cable isn't snagged on anything, and that it's long enough. You don't want it to overtighten and

break, or pull the coupler loose if you have to make a tight turn.

■ **Lights.** Brake lights, turn signals, and running lights should all be working. Check inside trailer lights, as well. Have someone inside your tow vehicle test the brakes, then the right and left turn indicators. Make sure the lights on both your tow vehicle and trailer are fully functional.

■ **Dashboard.** Check the fluid levels. If anything needs topping off, from fuel to windshield-washer fluid, take care of it now.

■ **Windows, vents, doors.** Open the windows and the roof vent, and close the screens to safely provide your horse fresh air. Look inside the trailer to be sure you have everything (water tank? tack trunk? saddles? broom?), then close the doors, and check that they're truly shut.

■ **Ramp and rear door(s).** Every once in a while, someone starts to drive off without lifting the ramp or closing the back of the trailer. If you do a walk-around inspection before every trip, this won't happen to you.

■ **Your horse.** Don't laugh. Believe it or not, someone has also arrived at a trailhead only to discover that something important was left behind: the horse! Again, your walk-around inspection will ensure that you never unintentionally leave your horse at home.

looking, or be prepared to replace the boards with a good hardwood, such as oak.

After-Market Accessories

After you purchase your trailer, invest in these extras for your safety and that of your horse.

• **Bedding.** Mats typically hold in urine and manure, so bedding is needed to absorb liquids and maintain a nonslip surface for your horse's hooves. Deeper bedding under your horse's belly and hind legs will encourage urination, which can enhance his travel comfort. Many horses won't urinate if they're likely to splash their legs. Use dust-free bedding so your horse doesn't breathe in tiny particles, which could hurt his lungs.



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• **Brake controller.** Most states require brakes on trailers; electric brakes are the most common and practical type. A brake-controller box in your tow vehicle (usually placed under the steering wheel) allows you to activate the trailer brakes independently of your tow vehicle's brakes. If your trailer begins to sway, the brake controller can help

Before you head down in the road with your new trailer, take a few moments to perform a safety check. Make sure the hitch is connected correctly, and that all the bolts are tight and in good repair.

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Reflective strips, decals, and signs on your trailer and tow vehicle promote safety by increasing your visibility. Even a simple sign saying "Caution Horses" on the back of your trailer will help other drivers notice you and encourage them to stay safely back.



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Window screens help protect your horse's delicate eyes from flying debris. They also help keep your trailer cool on hot days by limiting the amount of sun that comes through the windows.

you control it without hitting the brakes of your tow vehicle.

- **Fan.** On hot days and when stuck in traffic, a small, 12-volt fan can help keep your horse cool by keeping your trailer ventilated. You can buy such a fan at any recreational-vehicle supply store.

- **Head bumper.** A head bumper will help protect your horse's delicate poll area during loading/unloading and the trailer ride itself. You can find one made from Styrofoam, neoprene, or leather/felt.

- **Reflective decals.** Reflective strips, decals, and signs on your trailer and tow vehicle promote safety by increasing your visibility. Even a simple sign saying "Caution: Horses" on the back of your trailer will help other drivers notice you and encourage them to stay back. Also consider a sign that reads, "Caution: If you can't see my mirrors, I can't see you. Do not follow too closely."

- **Trailer mats.** Mats are essential for your horse's comfort. They provide cushioning, dampen some trailer vibrations, and help make the ride quieter. Mats should be nonslip, providing both traction and cushioning.

- **Trailer mirrors.** Mirrors are legally required, and will help you keep your horse safe. Legally, both your left and right mirrors should allow you to see down the side and well beyond the end of your trailer. If your trailer is wider than your tow vehicle, you may need to extend your mirrors. You can either retrofit your tow vehicle with an electric extension model, or opt for less costly options, which include slide-on, strap-on, and fender-mount models. Convex stick-on mirrors will help you overcome your blind spot.

- **Weight-distributing hitch.** Whether your hitch is a Class III or a Class IV, use a weight-distributing hitch (WDH) for maximum safety and comfort. A Class III hitch has a weight-carrying rating of 5,000 pounds, which increases to 7,500 pounds with a WDH. A Class IV hitch has a weight-carrying rating of 7,500 pounds, which increases to 10,000 pounds with a WDH.

- **Window screens.** Window screens help protect your horse's delicate eyes from flying debris. They also help keep your trailer cool on hot days by limiting the amount of sun that comes through the windows. ■