

DR. CHRISTA BRANCH, DVM

This month, we interview Dr. Christa Branch, DVM, of Snowy Range Veterinary Clinic in Laramie, WY. Dr. Branch has been a veterinarian for over 20 years and she gives us some tips on keeping our horses safe and healthy while hauling. Next month Dr. Branch will cover what to do if we have an injury or sickness while on the road.

TWISTER: Dr. Branch, what would you say is the most important thing we can do to keep our horses safe while hauling?

DR. BRANCH: Training your horse to haul is a major concern. Don't try to throw them in the trailer right before an event and expect them to haul well. The horse needs to understand loading and unloading calmly, how to stand tied, and also how to deal with the motion of the trailer without scrambling or falling. The more relaxed a horse is while hauling, the better.

TWISTER: A few months ago we interviewed Craig Cameron, and he suggested practicing loading your horse in different trailers, slant and straight loads, ramp trailers, loading and unloading in the dark, etc. to get them used to anything in case of an emergency.

DR. BRANCH: Yes, the more your horse is used to hauling in any situation, the less likely it is he will injure himself or become stressed.

TWISTER: So if our horses are used to hauling, what else can we do?

DR. BRANCH: Maintenance of the trailer is also important. Make sure that the floor is sturdy and that the walls do not have any sharp edges or protrusions that can cause cuts. Also clean the trailer to make sure the air flowing inside is as clean as possible to avoid respiratory issues. I advise to keep your drop down head doors closed, or use screens to keep the horses face and eyes safe from debris. I see a lot of horses get injured from their heads sticking out of the window when traveling.

Also, try to haul horses that like each other next to each other, and make sure they are securely tied. A loose horse has a lot more room to move around and get injured due to motion when you turn or stop. I think in a slant load trailer it's easier for a horse to balance than in a straight load trailer, just like if you were to ride a surfboard, you would stand at an angle to the motion.

TWISTER: What are the most common injuries or illnesses you see due to hauling?

DR. BRANCH: Bumps, bruises, and cuts, colic, and foreign bodies in the eye.

TWISTER: How would we prevent those?

DR. BRANCH: Making sure the trailer is smooth on the inside and that the horse loads and unloads well helps with the cuts and bumps. If your horse is not a good hauler, or the horse next to him isn't, wrapping legs is always a good idea; it also helps support the vascular system on longer trips.

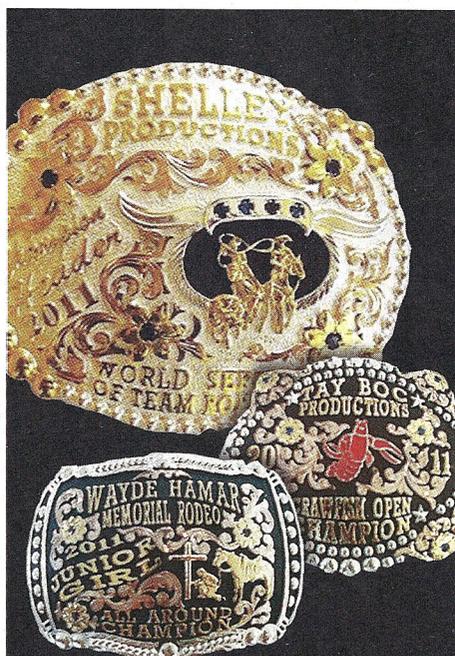
To help prevent colic, you want to make sure the horse is well hydrated before and during the trip. If you can bring your own water, that helps. Don't just load your horse up after a run and take off. Properly cooling out the horse and giving them plenty of water before loading is important. Keeping hay in front of a horse in the trailer can sometimes keep their digestive system moving. If the horse is stressed by hauling for any reason, that could potentially incite a colic incident, so drive smoothly and take your time.

Don't let your horse overheat or get cold. Take into consideration the horse's environment, if the horse is a pasture horse and has winter hair, don't put a blanket on. If it is a stabled horse, they may need a blanket. You should open vents and windows enough to keep good airflow, but in extremely cold weather be cautious of chilling the horse. Hauling is exercise for the horse, and while the trailer is moving they need to balance constantly, which is a workout. The trailer is also a closed environment, which intensifies body heat. They will be warmer in the trailer than standing outside on the same day.

It is a good idea to stop for lunch or take longer, 30 minute, fuel breaks so the horses can take a rest. Monitor your horse to make sure he isn't getting overheated or stressed in the trailer and offer water if possible when you stop. I don't suggest unloading a horse unless it is safe to do so and necessary, or the trip is over 8 hours, depending on the horse. Most rest areas and gas stations are not safe environments to unload horses.

For eye injuries, keeping the drop downs or windows closed or screened helps prevent debris flying into the trailer and also keeping the trailer inside and out smooth and maintained helps avoid the horse scraping or poking his eye.

TWISTER: Thank you, Dr. Branch! Next month, we will have you give us some tips on first aid, and what to do if something happens to our horse while we are traveling.



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