

TRAVEL TRAUMA IN HORSES

We all know people who get car sick, airsick or sea sick and there must be a few horses out there which get motion sickness in the same sort of way. I don't know of anybody who has died or had their career ruined as a result of travel related illness but I hear of lots of horses to whom this has happened.

In discussing this problem with my clients and friends I began to appreciate just how much time some horses spend on the road and that the problem ranges all the way through Ignorance, Poor Preparation, Cruelty, Neglect, and Poor Design of Floats. I also found out that some animals can be severely stressed by a 3 hour trip and that some carriers, notably some of the respected interstate ones regularly transport horses right across the Nullabour, and deliver them in perfect condition every time.

We take our animals to shows, events, studs, trainers or new properties all the time. We spend enormous amounts of energy and money preparing them for their sport and bringing them to a peak for the big event and we should spend an equivalent amount of effort in making sure we don't blow it, during one such trip.

Training:

The first thing to do with a new or a young horse is to get their confidence in loading and unloading and generally being in and around floats. It is also a good idea to go through this sort of retraining for a horse which has had a bad experience with floating and shows that he has lost his confidence or trust. Practice trips with loading and unloading at breaks along the way is an essential part of float training as all trips should be broken every 3 hours and the animal unloaded to have a little green pick, a walk around and something to drink.

Stand in the float one day and have someone drive along a winding or bumpy track too fast. This will give you some idea of what the horse can be going through if you the driver is not thinking about him at every corner along the way while you are at the wheel.

Float Design (and Maintenance):

Argument over design and loading configuration will go on for ever and don't assume that a well known brand of float is well designed. You can not buy a well designed wheel barrow anymore and we have been making them for hundreds of years.

The requirements include the following;

Access should be quick and simple and strong and there should be room to manoeuvre if necessary once on board. You should be able to get to a horses head quickly upon stopping to calm or reassure an animal after any sort of incident along the way which could cause panic and the head space shouldn't be claustrophobic.

Ventilation should be plentiful, adjustable and circulate freely about the head area but not be a chilling draft about the body.

Temperature should be manageable through air flow and rugging and each individual horse will have his own requirements which you should cater to.

Flooring must be in good condition and provide drainage and plenty of grip with no possibility of becoming slippery whatever happens inside. Woven rubber matting on top of a rubber floor or a bed of fresh shavings on the rubber floor are a couple of good alternatives.

Partitioning must be very strong and positioned to provide support to the body but not extend too low and interfere with the legs at all, it must provide lateral support but not encourage the horse to travel leaning up against it. There must be no possibility of the horse getting hung up over or jammed under partitions if it falls or panics during a trip.

Room to Brace while the float travels is crucial. If a horse cannot brace for a corner without its hoofs coming up against a wall or standing on another horses feet it will quickly, and quite naturally, become distressed or worse.

Regular maintenance and attention especially to the state of the floor and the suspension is often overlooked. Make sure the breaking system works smoothly and well. (Suzi recommends electric braking as being safer and easier).

Whether you should load facing to the rear, to the front or diagonally all have their proponents with the rear facing positioning being favored recently. Common sense tells me that a horse could be better able to brace against a sudden stop if it were facing aft and thereby be better protected from a bad driver. I would think that care, consideration and good preparation are more important than many of the finer points of design. You will have horses who will show you their own preferences as to how they like to travel, accommodate them if you can.

Private Transportation:

- -Prepare your horses properly with travelling boots, leg padding or tail bandages if required.
 - -Plan long journeys with regular wayside stops no more than 3 hours apart.
- -Plan to have extra time in hand for extra breaks or unforeseen problems along the way.
- -Look out for and use good and safe places along the way. Get the horses off, give them a drink, let them have a walk about and possibly a pick of grass.
- -Many horses who don't like to urinate in the float will happily wait if they know you will be stopping regularly.
 - -Check and clean the floor of the float, take out the manure, smooth over the bedding.
- -Take note of the frequency of evacuation, no manure when expected can be the first sign of colic.
- -Take note of the temperature and ventilation and check the horses when you first board the float for any signs of temperature distress.

Hydration is very important while traveling and feed much less so. You should be most aware of the horses consumption and attitude toward water offered. Some animals prefer water from home (in this case - bring it) others will appreciate a treat with molasses in the water (if this helps to get water into them - do it)

If you are following a special travel preparation program like the one I outline below, add the Herbal Travel Mix to the water at each stop. If there is any distress add Rescue Remedy or a Herbal Trauma Mix to the water or feed it directly over the tongue. If there were any suspicions of colic developing or dehydration or nervous distress give the appropriate treatments, spend the time required exercising and comforting the horse and extend the break.

Commercial Transportation:

Interview your carrier and ask him about his equipment, his route, when and where his scheduled stops will be and encourage him to convince you that he knows what he is doing. If the carrier has not come recommended to you by someone you know who has had first hand experience with him ask to provide you with names and phone numbers of people who have used him regularly. Call a couple of these people.

If you have any doubts whatsoever look around for alternatives or reconsider taking the horse yourself.

Provide the carrier with adequate rugging, any special Herbal Travel Mixture or Trauma Mixture and instructions as to dosage. Above all, provide contact telephone numbers so that you can be advised of any problems developing along the way. All carriers now carry mobile phones and there is no excuse for an unreported problem.

Arrange to be at the destination when the animal arrives and make it clear to the carrier that you will pay the account only upon your animals delivery in good condition.

If, while making any of these detailed arrangements, you have any doubts, go back to square one.

Once a horse has had a bad experience or gone down they will lose confidence and become bad travelers thenceforth. When a horse has become a nervous traveler it will always use up heaps of adrenaline and nervous energy during a trip which you would rather have available for your competition.

The Worst that can Happen:

- -Your horse can be flung down, jammed under, hung over or otherwise trapped or injured by a cowboy driver and that includes yourself.
- -Your horse can be asphyxiated, dehydrated, overheated or chilled by poor design or management of ventilation or rugging.
- -Your horse can become panicked and remain in a state of panic for a period of many hours in the worst possible case.

Any of these "worst case" extremes are inexcusable and constitute cruelty and ignorance. They would be prosecutable offenses if inflicted upon a person.

Any of these experiences are likely to result in impaction colic, high temperature, extreme dehydration, extreme stiffness in the limbs, no interest in feed, in water or life in general and require immediate first aid treatment with Rescue Remedy or a Herbal Trauma Treatment.

Such severe mistreatment can lead to pneumonia as a secondary infection or develop into stress founder and, if not cause the death of the animal, it can certainly be end of a competition career not to mention the loss of your investment.

Any carrier who regularly delivers a horse in this sort of condition should be named to everyone you speak to whenever talking about horse transport and your personal ambition should be to take care that your horses never have a single bad traveling experience.

Herbal Treatments and Prevention of Travel Related Sicknesses:

Trauma Treatments: Any extreme of shock whether physical or emotional requires urgent treatment to prevent the downstream effects of such shock. The homeopathic Rescue Remedy treatment is the very first thing which should be administered to the animal. This can be administered as just a couple of drops in the mouth or in the eye and is best administered before the horse is moved at all.

Take a dose yourself when coming upon a distressed animal to help you settle and to make better decisions.

As a herbalist I make up, in addition to Rescue Remedy, Herbal Trauma Treatments which are blends of suitable herbs to help an animal recover more fully from trauma. These blends would include herbal treatments for nervous and adrenal exhaustion, for kidney function in the case of dehydration, for heart stress in the case of prolonged panic and for the immune system which always suffers as a result of stress. I would include also homeopathic treatments to minimize the effects of the trauma on the animals trust, confidence and subsequent reaction to travel, competition or tolerance to stress in general.

Preventative Treatments: I often formulate Herbal Travel Mixes for individual animals taking into account their own personality and experience. These consist of herbal extracts or decoctions to build up an animals reserves, to ensure it is in the best possible shape to cope with the stress of travel.

The advice I give may be as simple as just adding cold Rosehip Tea to drinking water for the trip to ensure that kidney function is maintained and adrenal glands are well protected from depletion.

For animals who don't travel well or are so valuable or so highly placed in their field that absolutely no chances whatsoever can be taken with spoiling any of their physical or emotional form during travel I make up very sophisticated personalized mixtures indeed. These will include herbs to minimize any chances of digestive system problems like scouring or colic; herbs to protect kidneys and adrenal glands from stress; herbs to nourish and strengthen the nervous system to allow a fearful horse for example to be relaxed and comfortable on the trip; herbs to build up the immune system to ensure there is no physical loss of form or likelihood of contracting an infection; and homeopathic treatments to treat any weakness areas in the individual animals reaction patterns (fearfulness, apprehension, self confidence, tendency to panic etc.)

These individual comprehensive treatments are given for a couple of weeks before, during and for a few days after, a major relocation or the day before and during a normal weekend trip.

Herbal Ingredients:

The following list is by no means comprehensive but it includes most of the herbs I would consider for inclusion in preparations to treat travel related trauma or for protecting horses from all possible negative effects of travel.

Rosehips: - A valuable herb extremely high in Iron and Vitamin C and especially useful to protect the body from kidney and adrenal exhaustion occasioned by fear or panic. As a herbal tea Rosehips can be prepared and given in drinking water and if you want to do nothing else to protect your horse on a trip, Rosehip tea in their drinking water would be my #1 Tip.

Maritime Pine: - This extract from the bark of a particular species of pine tree is an antioxidant 15 or 20 times more powerful than Vitamin C or Vitamin E. This herb can build up your immunity more than any single other substance I know of and is useful in a whole range of immune systems illnesses from Cancer through to Attention Deficit Disorder in Children. Its application in a Travel Mix is to give your horses immunity a huge boost so that any stress which can cause a depletion is countered immediately.

Hawthorn Berry: - Hawthorn is a major Heart Tonic especially suitable for horses and is the second thing I reach for when coming upon a distressed horse. (The first being Rescue Remedy) Hawthorn is your best bet to bring back a severely abused animal (I am thinking of one which has been down and/or in a panic for hours - while some barbarian has continued to drive)

Vervain: - Is a herb I include in almost all my nervous system treatments for horses. The nervous system requiring is one which tends to be agitated, fidgeting, and "nervy" generally. (Nervous Nelly). Such a horse is more likely to panic or lose its cool if unexpected things happen during a trip. Giving Vervain before and during a trip will help such a horse cope better with the trip and be less likely to run into trouble.

Hops: - Is another nervous system herb which I often include in a horse mixture and this represents another aspect of the panicky nervous disposition found in many animals. Any fashion in which the nervous system can be supported during a trip will leave more nervous energy "in the tank" for the competition.

Chamomile: - Is the primary digestive and para-sympathetic nervous system support herb. Chamomile administered prior to stress or regularly to a horse prone to Colic is the best preventative treatment for this condition. There is no excuse for Colic resulting from travel it is always a reflection of poor preparation or handling.

Dandelion and Agrimony: - Are liver support herbs which along with Chamomile may help reduce the chances of scouring occurring due to stress. Scouring will aggravate dehydration problems, is debilitating in itself and can make footing more difficult and lead to a fall within the float if the floor becomes slippery. Dandelion will also play a role in preventing Colic developing during a trip.

Bach Flower Remedies: - The flower remedies I would consider would be all those involved in change, fear, exhaustion, apprehension, panic, shock etc. and would therefore include; Aspen, Rock Rose, Mimulus, Rescue Remedy, Wild Rose, Olive, Walnut and Larch for example.

My standard formulations containing all the substances mentioned above can be ordered online and dispatched the same day.

Robert McDowell
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