

Re-Educating the Anxious Float Loader



with Adam Sutton

Horsemanship trainer and educator, Adam Sutton conducts regular training and coaching sessions Australia-wide, including starting horses for all different disciplines, foundation training and problem solving. Adam's caring approach to horses, coupled with trust, respect and confidence, has earned him a reputation as one of Australia's best horse trainers.

Prior to his float loading demonstration at Equitana, Adam shares with us some tips and tricks for re-educating trauma-affected travellers.

When it all goes a little wrong

One of the biggest behavioural issues is horses and owners who have lost their confidence with loading and floating. This can be a result of a pre-learnt memory behaviour from a traumatic accident while travelling in an unsafe float or environment, or an accident that was totally out of anyone's control.

These situations can have a real impact on horses for longevity throughout their lives. These experiences can then result in their high levels of anxiety, fear, confusion or trauma. This then results in refusal to load, scrambling in the float, racing back out etc.



"When a horse loads mindfully they will unload mindfully."

Horses are just like humans when it comes to methods of travel. They also can have anxiety prior to getting on a float, feelings of the claustrophobia of being in a confined space, motion sickness etc. We really can understand where their initial fear can come from, and often we then portray our own fears to the horse, subconsciously.

First we need to think... would I feel safe travelling/loading in that float? Does it sound, look, feel like a safe and inviting place to be put in?

Horses and owners losing their confidence with floating can be a dangerous combination.

What does mindfully loading/unloading mean?

We want the horse to be happily and mindfully self-loading themselves, not us loading the horse. The horse needs to mentally enter the float, before the human, without being led, coaxed or forced on. This should be a one-person job without an audience for assistance!

I'm sure we have all experienced or witnessed situations where we have seen horses being 'forced' on the float, bribed with food, ropes, many 'helpers' and even brute force. This does not result in a mindful loading activity.

"We are trying to make the wrong thing difficult and the right thing easy!"

The worst thing you can do is forcefully load a horse against its will.

We need to understand the horse's fears and phobias and why they are anxious.

As soon as you say "yes, get on" and try to pull them on the float and they say "no" and refuse, you have set yourself up for a contest and an argument. We want it to be the horse's job and idea to load on the float, not our job to load them.

Prepare in Advance for Success

A horse that has experienced prior trauma with floating/loading will need a lot of patience. These steps are some simple tips/exercises to give confidence. This will make all the difference to ensure your horse has a calm trip.



Float Safety

Before you attempt the journey always check your float for safety;

1. Does it have sufficient airflow?
2. Is the flooring secure?
3. Are the chains intact?
4. Take a companion in the float the first time, make sure that horse is experienced and a relaxed traveller/loader
5. Are there any rattles or sounds that could cause anxiety while travelling?

A good idea is to have a "float trip" in our floats to experience/hear/feel what the horses will go through whilst travelling in your float.

Time

This process will take as long as it takes! Rushing is not an option.

Lots of repetition with re-learning will ensure confidence long term. It's not a race to lock the horse in and travel. They must be comfortable to be in the space before you take off.

Basic Ground Control of the Horse

Start off little. Try to establish what they are confident with and what their fear base is. Sometimes you can make the situation worse or confuse the situation by asking too much of the horse. Start slowly, using different desensitising objects, flags, noodles, toys etc to assist their mindset to be relaxed.

Re-educating horses to float is all about re-establishing their confidence. This includes...

1. You have to have the confidence to handle your horse safely.
2. Your horse needs to respond to your aids and cues.
3. The horse needs to be able to go forward from our aids and cues, change direction from left to right and then forward again.
4. We need to be able to direct the horse's nose and face. If you think about it, the first thing that goes in the float is their nose and face.
5. Horses need not be reactive to our commands.

All these elements are important parts to have established prior to attempting to load.



The elements of float loading can be practised with obstacles before approaching the float. Here, a horse is asked to navigate a narrow space, emulating the bay of a float.



A bridge is perfect for getting the horse comfortable with different footing.

Obstacles

Instead of just facing the horse up to the float — that we know they have a fear, phobia or experienced a traumatic event from — we want to start to build up their confidence. We can do this by using some home made simple obstacles/challenges to assist in re-developing your horse's confidence to handle new situations that are not natural.

When presenting your horse at the obstacles, always let the horse go first. Don't lead them over or pull them behind. Let them develop confidence and bravery in going forward and first in their own time.

Some simple ones we use when re-educating traumatic floaters are...

1. Simple wooden bridges. Allow your horse to be brave and walk over the bridge. This simulates going up, over and off a tailgate/ramp. The horse needs to have confidence in putting its feet onto a ramp.
2. Small spaces/tunnels to walk through, simulates walking alone into a narrow space.
3. Some pool noodles hanging down from a frame, or walking through a curtain. This simulates them walking through the float or having things over their head in small spaces.
4. A large tarp, weighted down securely and safely. This gives the feeling of walking over a foreign ground, ramp, the flooring of a float etc.

Our Own Emotional Mindset

Why is the handler's mindset important?

We, as owners, also need to be aware of our own anxieties and mindset prior to commencing this journey of reestablishing our and the horse's confidence with floating/travelling.

After these incidences occur we then fill our heads with negative thoughts that are carried through to the horse. These thoughts often start prior to the floating day occurs, "I hope my horse will load on today", "I'll have to get up a few hours earlier just to get him loaded" or gathering some friends to "help get him on the float", "he goes on with a good broom or a whip" or being coaxed or bribed onto the float using feed or treats, then suddenly being locked in and confined. You're then feeding yourself negative energy about the event that hasn't happened yet. You're actually feeding into the horse's anxiety and this then builds up for you both.

It is important for handlers to keep cool, calm and relaxed. A calm mindset assists in keeping the horse's anxiety under control.

- Be aware of your body language, how you hold the rope.
- Don't show emotion in the lead — don't hold the rope with any tension, or force.
- Unclench your jaw, this relaxes your mouth and neck.

Where to from here?

Reintroducing the horse to the "scene of the crime".

Introducing the float:

1. Park the float in a large flat area, open it up, remove the breaching gates and take the divider across. I like to have the whole float available.
2. Start by asking the horse to move from the left side of the float to the right side in a semi-arc/circle. It doesn't matter how big the semi-circle is. Start tapping one side of float and re-sending the horse to the next side, continue this process, just like with the above obstacles, just continue persevering. We are trying to make the wrong thing difficult and the right thing easy.

Let the horse show their emotions, but don't get involved in it. You may feel you need to rescue your horse or reassure them. It is important at this time to not touch/pat your horse's nose/face. If you feel the need to

reassure/touch your horse on the wither so as not to confuse the direction of the horse's face, it needs to be facing the float.



Asking the horse to move in an arc around the tailgate.

Wait until you get that first sign where the horse starts to look inside the float or down at the tailgate. The moment he looks away or looks in another direction is when his mindset/focus has changed and you then need to resume your left/right hand side movements.

Stop, Wait, Relax

3. Re-start your semi-circles, but start to make them smaller and smaller until he looks again. This time might take a bit longer, he might or might not take a step on the ramp. What we are looking for is the horse to be mindfully looking towards the front of the float. When this happens let the horse take the next step forward without being physically forced. There are times when you may need to use your buggy whip to encourage him to come forward, but with minimal pressure from the rope.
4. Once the horse is mindfully looking towards the float, let their nose go down and look for as long as they want. If the horse backs away again, return to

left and right. Let it be their choice to re-front the middle again, face up and re-position themselves.

When you are re-training a nervous floater, for the first few times, just let them load and be comfortable in the space. There is no rush to move bars across and lock them in. This is not about getting doors closed. Your horse must have the confidence to be in the float space relaxed and content.

If they want to back out, let them, just repeat the previous steps again.

5. Once the horse is comfortable and they start to feel that the float is the happy place, start to move the divider across, and ask him to re-enter the float in the smaller space. If they go to back out, repeat the above process until they mindfully reload again. Don't rush to lock him in, wait until he is relaxed and standing calmly for a while, prior to closing the doors or chains.
6. Once the horse is self-loading and content with being in the confined space, start out by doing a small drive to regain their confidence.
7. Once you have a successful trip, return home, unload calmly and reload again.

If you really are not able to achieve these steps then it might be an option to be prepared to accept an alternative transport method like truck, switch to angle if straight load or call in a professional for assistance.

Time, patience and mindset, can all contribute to the successful re-education of your horse and their floating and travelling. 🔄

Adam Sutton is proudly sponsored by Hawkesbury River Saddle Co, Easy On Rugs, Feedchar and Boston Park Equine.



Making the float a happy and relaxing place will encourage the horse to step on board.