

# To Tie or Not to ?

*Tying your horse in the trailer is supposed to help prevent injury – but does it? Here are the pros and cons.*

**Q** *Recently, a friend's horse died as a result of being tied in a trailer. When the trailer door was opened before the horse was untied, he pulled so hard that he broke the tie, flew out of the trailer, flipped over, and broke his neck. I know this tragedy could have been avoided. Can you discuss the pros and cons of tying a horse in a trailer?*  
—Randy Winter  
via e-mail

**A** In the Technical Large Animal Emergency Rescue course I teach with Tomas Gimenez, MVZ, Dr. Med. Vet, we partly focus on *preventing* incidents such as you describe. As we travel around the country giving seminars and workshops, too many people tell us about tragic trailer-related accidents. As you have observed, far too many of those injuries occur while the trailer is not even in motion!

Here, I'll give you some trailer-tying

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MARYLAND NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK POLICE



*To avoid a trailer-tying tragedy, use a tie rope that will break under pressure, such as one made from a hay string (shown), leather, or a high-tech option. Shown is the safe tie method used by the Maryland National Capital Park Police.*



PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. REBECCA GIMENEZ

*"This is how horses are attached in professional hauler vans," notes Dr. Rebecca Gimenez. "They use chains on the halter. They are betting against an accident – nothing in this photo will break."*

pros and cons, plus six safety tips.

**Trailer-tying pros:** Tying a horse is supposed to prevent him from hurting himself in the trailer, such as turning around or biting/disturbing a neighboring horse. A loose horse can really hurt another one that cannot defend himself and can cause a wreck as the injured horse seeks to escape from the attack.

Tying a horse also prevents a horse lying down, crawling under a divider, or from putting his head down under a barrier, then panicking when he raises his head. Tying also controls the head of fractious or aggressive horses and stallions, and prevents horses from reaching down to get hay/feed off the floor.

**Trailer-tying cons:** The biggest trailer-tying con is that the horse can catch a foot (or a trailer obstacle) in the tie rope, then panic and injure himself. You can tie a horse tightly enough to prevent him from catching a foot (and annoying his traveling buddy), yet still give him enough slack to balance himself.

Another con is the one you described. It is extremely important to untie a horse before opening the trailer door.

## Trailer Safety Tips

Here are several trailering safety tips, related to tying your horse in the trailer. **Provide feed carefully.** In the wild, a horse eats for 18 to 20 hours per



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*In the trailer, provide feed to keep your horse's digestive system running smoothly – but do so carefully, says Dr. Gimenez. If your horse is tied, provide hay in a bag that he cannot get his feet into, nor wrap around his head as he's pushing and pulling to get the hay.*

day. Anything you can do to simulate these conditions will enhance your horse's health. If he is tied, provide hay in a bag that he cannot get his feet into, nor wrap around his head as he's pushing and pulling to get the hay. If he is not tied, place the hay on the floor so he'll be able to maintain a more natural head/neck position. By putting his head down, he can drain debris from his respiratory system, which helps to prevent respiratory issues.

**Avoid bungee cords.** If you decide to tie your horse in the trailer, do not use a bungee-type stretch cord. These products are dangerous to horses and humans. I knew of one horse that was able to get out of the trailer while still attached to the cord – then it broke! I know of numerous horses and humans who have lost eyes and had faces cut open by these.

**Use a breakaway tie rope.** To avoid a trailer-tying tragedy, use a small rope or string that will break under pressure, such as leather, a hay string, or a high-tech option. (Two options are Davis Turtle Snap Cross Ties, available from [Equestrian Collections](#), and the safety-release trailer-tie products from [Jemal Escape Mechanisms](#).) Attach the breakaway part directly to the trailer's attachment or ring.

**Leave some slack.** One trailer-tying myth is that the tie rope helps a horse balance, and will even keep him from falling down if he loses his balance. This is false. To see how a horse balances

in the trailer, get a trailer cam. You'll then see how he balances during turns, stops, and acceleration.

Horses need room (a little slack in the rope) to use their heads and necks for balance. Standing up inside the trailer while it is in motion requires constant minor adjustments of the horse's musculature, even on the interstate at a constant speed. Short ties in particular make it almost impossible for a horse to balance with his own weight and normal methods. They also make it



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*If you use a traditional lead rope to tie your horse, you will likely need to cut your horse free if he panics, notes Dr. Rebecca Gimenez. Even this safety knot will pull tight. Carry a sharp knife, and know how to use it.*

impossible for a horse to get up. **Watch the rope ends.** If you choose to tie your horse in the trailer, make sure that the loose end of the tie rope cannot get outside of the trailer, where it could become wrapped around the axle or another object. This scenario will likely lead to a tragic death. **Train your horse.** The scenario you described could have been avoided if the horse had been taught to yield to pressure and to exit the trailer only when given a specific cue. Train your horse to safely load and unload with the help of a reputable trainer. Practice loading your horse as an essential evacuation skill, so he will load regardless of inclement weather and other adverse conditions. **USR**

*Rebecca Gimenez, PhD (animal physiology), is a primary instructor for Technical Large Animal Emergency Rescue. A Major in the United States Army Reserve, she is a decorated Iraqi war veteran and past Logistics Officer for VMAT-2. She is an invited lecturer on animal-rescue topics around the world, and an equine journalist.*

*Dr. Rebecca Gimenez's TLAER business partner, also a primary instructor, is Tomas Gimenez, MVZ, Dr. Med. Vet., professor emeritus, Clemson University, National Veterinary Response Team, National Disaster Medical System.*

