

# Trailer Loading Problems

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I received the following emails from Jennifer Schmuck, a fellow *Mules and More* staff writer. Jennifer lives in Germany and writes about her adventures with Larry and Katie:

Email 1: I don't know if you know who I am, but I read your articles every month and thought of you today. Here's my report of our first trip with the trailer we just bought. Obviously, we could not go!

Of all things, my mule Katie won't load. She puts her front feet up the ramp, that's it. When we had them imported from the United States, both mules loaded into everything, including the flight container. And Katie has loaded perfectly her whole life.

After trying for two hours, I gave up and put them back in the pen, but without new hay. So hopefully they are hungry when we try again an hour later. Larry got in fine three times, but then Katie made him nervous with her fussing, and now he is scared, too. Katie doesn't seem scared. She even falls almost asleep on the ramp with her feet on it or starts fidgeting with her tongue because she is bored. She just



The SCHMUCK'S trailer

doesn't want to get in.

I guess we'll just try every day, keep her there for some time, offer feed, etc., and hopefully one day she will think it's too stupid to not get in.

It's our mule anniversary today and perfect weather for riding.

We have an European trailer (pictured on this page). There's always the danger of them slipping down the side of the ramp when not going back perfectly straight. And it must feel like a mule trap!

Email 2: After an hour, we returned to the mules and the trailer. I did groundwork with Katie for some time in front of the trailer, including the "Go forward" cue, using the white whip tapping on her butt. She put her front feet up the ramp and that was it.

I backed her up, then praised her. I did some more work (not pestering her, just asking for some basic movements). Then, when I had enough of this, I wrapped the lead around the chest bar and took the slack out. Every time she took a step I praised, treated and took the slack out again. Did that twice, and in she went. Then I fed her. I got Larry in, too, using treats.

We then backed them out. Twice, Larry "shot" back out. I think both mules feel trapped in this kind of trailer. I'm glad we had not closed the back bars (and still haven't). They were inside the trailer but not right up to the chest bars.

The second time Larry shot out of the trailer, Katie wanted out, too. But when Katie feels the pull, she stops...Larry doesn't! I told them both to back up before they really started. I thought I better make it look as if it was our idea.

We stopped after they had eaten quite a lot of goodies inside, then took them back to their pen and water. Katie came up to me to get a hug.

I guess we still have a long way to go until we can close up and drive. This trailer must feel like a trap to them, and Katie is not dumb.

Did I do okay? I hope I didn't do too badly. We only have "horse folks" here, and their advice is often wrong for our mules, in my opinion.

Here is my response to Jennifer's email:

You are on the right track with you mules. Your mules not loading into the trailer is a moving forward problem. They are not responding to the "Go Forward" cue.

Do not stop tapping on the hip until the mule takes one step forward. If the mule backs up, continue tapping. Even if the mule takes 10 steps back, keep tapping until it takes one step forward.

If you tap and the mule does not move, tap a little harder, then a little harder, and a little harder until the mule takes one step forward. After you can tap and get one step forward consistently, build on that step. Ask for two steps, then three steps, etc.

Practice the "Go Forward" cue away from the trailer. Teach your mules to load on a piece of plywood, a plastic tarp, etc. Use your imagination. The more things you can think of to load your mules onto, the better.

Make sure all items are secure. You do not want the item to move underneath the mule or hurt the mule in any way.

When you practice loading your mules on different items, make sure to have the mules step on the item with one front leg, then back the foot off. Do this several times before you

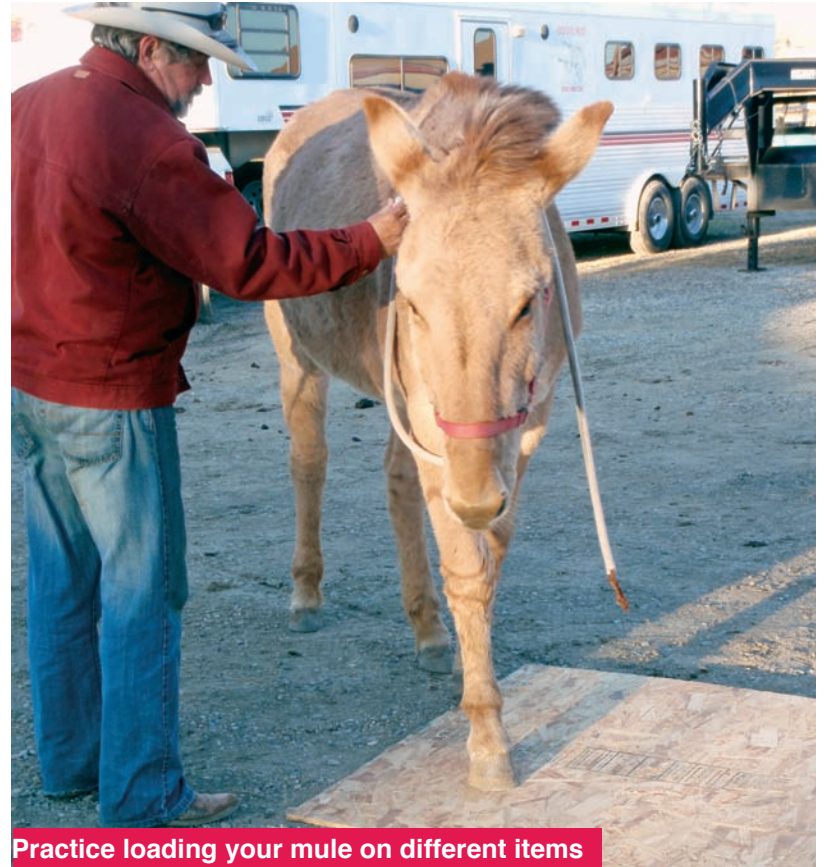


Practice the “Go forward” cue away from the trailer

ask the mule to step on the item with both front feet. After many times with both front feet, ask for three feet and then four feet, remembering to back the feet off each time.

By backing the feet off each item you are teaching the mule to back out of the trailer. This will allow you to control the mule when they back out of the trailer, instead of your mule rushing backwards and bumping his head or hurting himself. You will ask the mule for only one step back as he backs out of the trailer. If the mule runs out of the trailer, load him back into the trailer. Wait until the mule is standing quietly and ask him to take one step backward, towards the back of the trailer, and stop. Then another step back and stop. Continue this until the mule is out of the trailer. Work each mule separately.

I never withhold feed from a mule for not responding to a cue. The mule is not responding to your cue because he is afraid. Remember, the easiest thing for a mule to do is to re-



Practice loading your mule on different items

spond to our cues. Why? Because he receives a release every time he responds correctly. Food has nothing to do with our training. Your mule will not relate the lack of food to the fact that he will not load in the trailer. I also do not use feed or treats as a reward for responding to a cue. This can make a mule look for treats and ignore cues. I do not want my mules digging in my pockets and nipping at my hands. I want them focused on me and what I will ask.

You did an excellent job of taking a break when you became frustrated. This gives us the opportunity to step back, get our emotions in check, and regroup. We then go back to our training with a clear head and do not take our frustrations out on the mule. Our results come quicker because our mule does not sense our frustration. Mules know when we are frustrated and they will either get nervous or begin to shut down. This makes training twice as hard because we are trying to work through their nerves, too.

You will also want to get your mules calm inside the trailer. Before you ever close the rear door, load one mule into the trailer and de-spook your mules inside the trailer. You want to make trailer noises. Tap the side of the trailer, open and close a window, etc. Remember, your goal is to have the mule stand calmly inside the trailer. If the mule backs out of the trailer while you are de-spooking him, you have done too much.

Stay consistent with your cues and take your time. You can stop the lesson at any time. As long as the mule is calm, then continue the lesson later.



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