

A Safer Ride

Head Out on the Highway

Moving a horse from one place to another is fraught with challenges, whether it is traveling by air, or simply overland by commercial carrier or horse trailer. Transport stresses and their effects on equine health have been well documented, but what about when the goal is to get a horse to the track in racing condition? Elements such as thoughtful equipment design, regular vehicular maintenance, and prudent operating protocols are “musts” to ensure a safe, minimally stressful journey.

By Land, or by Air?

Beyond the dollar cost, a lot of other variables are involved in making the decision about what type of transport to use. Gayle Van Leer, owner of Gayle Van Leer Thoroughbred Services, feels that when making a choice between air and road transport, you have to consider the “law of diminishing returns.”



Transporting horses by air is more expensive, but in some instances it is less stressful

“It’s clearly a lot more expensive to fly a horse than to van one, but I advise Thoroughbred owners and farm managers that when possible, they should spend the extra money and fly the horse, particularly following a sale,” said Van Leer, who feels the stresses of a horse sale compounded by transport stresses can leave the door wide open for a variety of illnesses.

“It’s very stressful for horses to go through a sale. If you take that horse that’s just been through that experience, and put them on a van for a multi-day trip, you’re just asking for that horse to get sick,” she said. “Your vet bill could end up being thousands of dollars, not to mention the time lost to recovery.”

However, there are times when a van is more suitable and offers some ways to save a buck when it comes to transporting horses, according to Van Leer.

“If you’re transporting foals, you can put two foals together in a box stall on a van after the weather is a bit cooler, or even two yearlings, if they’ve been pasturemates,” she said. “They travel well with a buddy.”

Van Leer points out it’s a whole different story with racehorses. “You can’t put a horse on a van for 3,000 miles, or for long hours in hot weather, and expect them to race effectively. If you can’t get

them to their destination by van within six or seven hours, forget it. It’s better to fly them or increase the lead time on when they’re sent,” she concluded.

The Companies You Keep

Some resources for investigating equine transport companies provide a look into their safety and government inspection records; one can identify them as a fully-licensed horse transport hauler committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of horses in their care.

The National Horse Carriers Association has been around since 1960, and membership is strictly limited to licensed carriers; their web site has a member directory, listed by state. Judge Manning, NHCA secretary/treasurer and president of Judge Manning Horse Transportation, says that not only are members held to a high standard, their twice-yearly summits are focused on the welfare of their passengers.

“At our meetings we’ll bring in subject matter experts as guest speakers. We’ll discuss issues such as the amount of air going through the trailer or sizing of stall space, and all the health issues involved in making things safe for the horse,” reported Manning. Over the years NHCA has welcomed state and federal Department of Transportation representatives; veterinarians from the

Florida, Kentucky, and U.S. Departments of Agriculture and UC-Davis; plus FMCSA safety experts.

The FMCSA is the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration; it’s the government agency tasked with oversight of the commercial carrier industry and prevention of commercial vehicle-related injuries and fatalities.

“The larger horse transport companies are under their scrutiny. Not only for roadside inspections, but the FMCSA comes to our offices and inspects our records, such as our driver qualification, background checks, and drug testing files. They also look at our maintenance programs and records,” said Manning, pointing out this type of oversight is in large measure how

so many horses are safely transported from point A to point B, despite some carriers flying under the government’s radar.

“The NHCA feels there are people transporting horses even though it’s not their number one business. We’re talking unlicensed operators or horse dealers, that sort of thing,” said Manning. “If I were a horse owner, I’d be very cautious.”

Safety: It’s Everyone’s Business

Even if you select a carrier that’s not an NHCA member, you can still check on the company’s safety record, through the FMCSA’s Safety and Fitness Electronic Records System (SAFER) Web-based Company Snapshot.

Available free of charge to the public, the Company Snapshot allows an ad hoc query for an individual carrier and provides information on a company’s size, commodity information, and safety record. The search can be conducted by company name, USDOT number, or MC/MX number, and the results include crash information and roadside out-of-service inspection information for the prior 24 months, plus the company’s safety rating.

The FMCSA has another initiative rolling out this year. Called the Comprehensive Safety Analysis 2010 (CSA2010), it’s a proac-

tive program designed to identify high-risk motor carriers that might require intervention in order to improve overall road safety and address issues before collisions occur.

Designed to monitor truck and bus companies, CSA2010 collects and analyzes 24 months of performance data per carrier, including information on unsafe or fatigued (hours-of-service) driving; controlled substance/alcohol; driver fitness; and vehicle maintenance and crashes. Manning reports the horse transport industry is welcoming this new program with open arms.

“Those of us that have been in the trucking business for a long time, we welcome it,” he said. “This level of maintenance and things like background checks, we’ve been doing that for years and years. We think it’s going to improve the equine transportation industry, and this type of regulation will improve safety for everyone on the road.”

Keeping Everything Shipshape

Sallee Horse Vans, has often been referred to as “the standard” when it comes to commercial horse transport; they’re not just focused on safety through maintenance and operation; they’re literally building it in from the ground up.

What to Ask Your Hauler

If you’ve got a company you’ve always used and been happy with, you don’t need this list. If, however, you’re in the market for a new equine transport company, here’s a little something for your due diligence process:

- Start with a search on the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration SAFER database, to look up a Company Snapshot for a prospective carrier’s safety record.
- Check to see if the company is a member of the National Horse Carriers Association.
- Questions to ask a company include:
 - What is your vehicle and trailer maintenance schedule?
 - Do you perform a pre-trip safety check, and what does that include?
 - Do you conduct background checks on drivers?
 - Do you have a drug testing program for drivers?
 - What is your smoking and alcohol policy?
 - What is your policy on texting and cell phone use?
 - Do you use GPS tracking and/or video surveillance equipment in vans?
 - How do you handle emergencies?

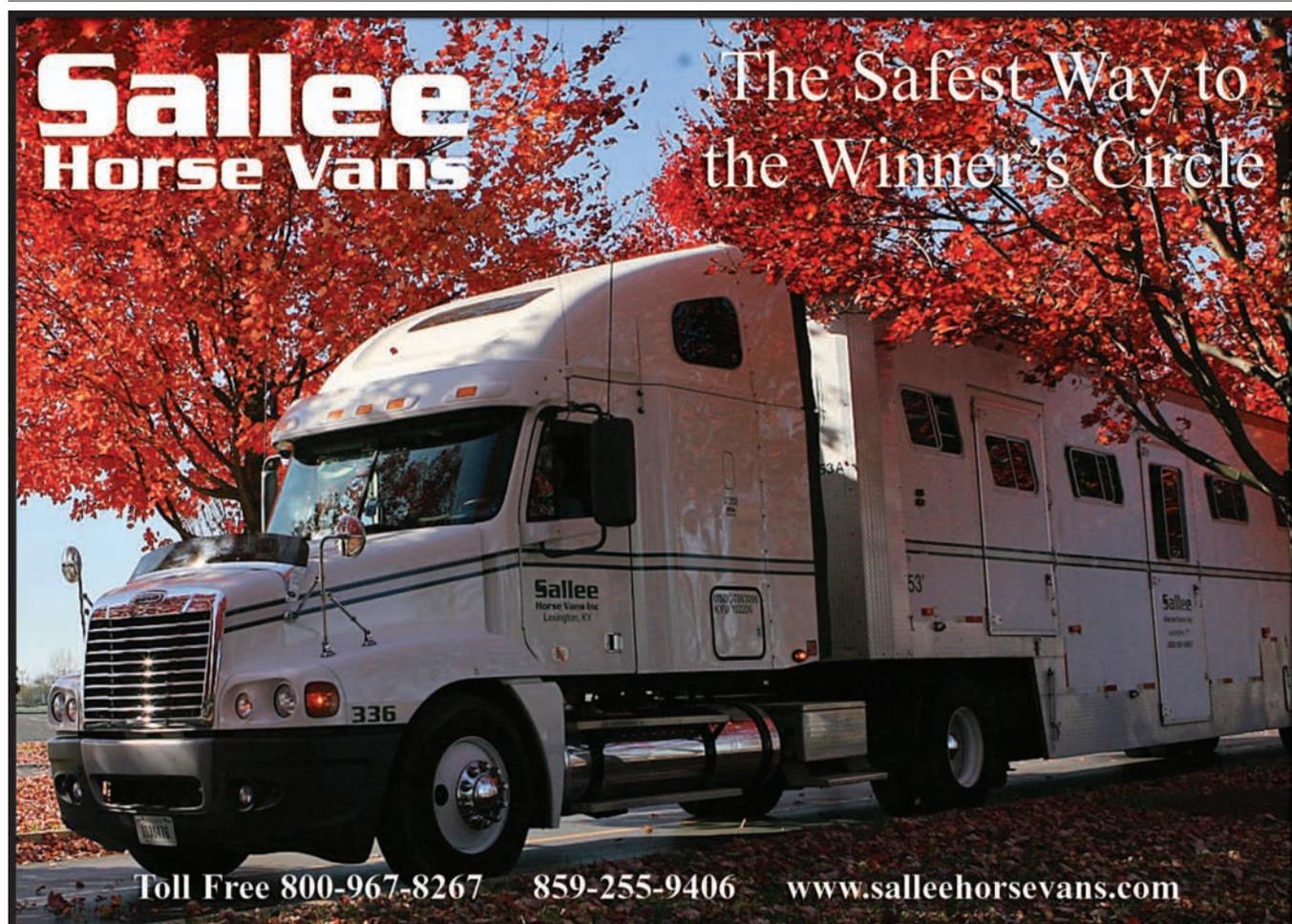
Sallee owner Nicole Pieratt reports that the company leases the trucks, but the trailers are built at company headquarters in Lexington by the Maintenance and Fabrication Department team.

“The trailers are built to industry standards that ensure comfort for the horse,” she said. “Then, we pay close attention to detail when finishing out the interior of the van, to try and prevent most ways a horse

could possibly injure himself. We know the importance of a smooth, safe ride, and the role that plays in a horse’s health and stress level. We try to give horses a ride that keeps them rested and ready for their competition.”

That same team is responsible for the overall maintenance and repair of the fleet.

“Every piece of our equipment is on a



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regular preventive maintenance schedule, and we maintain our vehicles well above the Department of Transportation's safety requirements," said Pieratt. "Plus, each vehicle goes through an

extensive safety inspection before each trip."

Sallee's pre-trip inspection involves the typical things checked on any vehicle before a road trip, such as fluids, lights, tires, hoses, belts, and clamps, but it also includes testing the air brake lines, looking for excessive brake wear, and making sure the running and braking lights are working properly, plus a thorough check of the van interior.

As for equine air travel, the plane itself falls under the oversight of the airlines, but the horse stalls can be monitored and maintained by either airlines or multi-service air brokers. Mike Payne, operations manager of Sutton Forwarding, says they check the equipment before and after every trip, and that everything is ready to go before the horse even shows up.

"We have extra stalls to rotate in and out as needed, and parts are interchangeable. If one of the doors breaks a pin or hinge, we'll simply take that door out and replace it," said Payne. "We find the best thing for the horse is to keep everything moving."

Hello, Operator?

One part of the horse transport equation is the tractor and trailer; drivers and handlers are a completely different issue. The best companies have a strict hiring protocol, and ongoing oversight and management policies.

"At Sallee, we conduct background

checks on drivers, plus a Motor Vehicle Report review. We also do a pre-employment road test and drug/alcohol screening, and a DOT physical," said Pieratt, who points out Sallee conducts ongoing random drug/alcohol screening, and that drivers must sign a cell phone agreement that includes a zero-tolerance for texting.

FMCSA research has shown that texting drivers take their eyes off the road an average of 4.6 out of every 6 seconds; at 55 miles per hour, that's the length of a football field, including end zones. Drivers who text or are otherwise distracted are also 20 times more likely to get in an accident, according to the USDOT.

Distracted driving has become a national epidemic, and it's a significant issue for large horse vans full of Thoroughbreds. Following a national Distracted Driving Summit in September 2009, U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood has implemented a series of actions to combat the issue, including a federal ban on commercial carrier driver texting, covering drivers of commercial trucks and buses; violations carry civil or criminal penalties up to \$2,750.

Van drivers aren't the only equine travel professionals. When traveling by air, horses are accompanied by flying grooms.

Andrea Branchini, manager at Horse America, feels these equine professionals are worth their weight in gold.

"The civil aviation authorities establish conduct standards for airline pilots, and they do a very good job," he said. "But flying grooms are incredibly important in helping the horses adapt to air travel and ensuring a safe flight for all aboard, since they're not only horse professionals, they also know the ramp, loading, and stall equipment inside and out."

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Are We There Yet?

Judge Manning says that horse carriers must live up to the rules imposed by the government, but his company was addressing cell phone use and safety before the ban. "Our customers expect communication from us, and they have a right to expect that when there are things like delays or route changes. It's a challenge, to maintain safety and communication at the same time, but we've been trying to reduce the number of cell phone calls for a while," he reported.

In order to reduce calls from the office to drivers and vice versa, they've harnessed Global Positioning System technology. "The most typical calls were 'where is the truck, and when will it arrive?' Owners and trainers like to know when their horse will be there, and then we'd have to call the driver to find out exactly where they were, and guesstimate how much longer the trip would take," said Manning.

With GPS units mounted in all the trucks, driver calls have been reduced to a minimum, and the GPS units provide better arrival time windows than the cable company. "Now, I can access the GPS system from a normal computer in the office, or even from my iPhone," said Manning. "We're really pleased with it; I can see where all the trucks are and where they've been, and I can even predict with some degree of accuracy their arrival time. It's important so that people can be there on the arrival end and be prepared, so we can be on our way quickly and not delay the other horses on our vans."

In Case of Emergency

When it comes to emergencies and horses, an ounce of prevention is worth 1,200 pounds of cure. While USRider Equestrian Motor Plan, which offers nationwide trailer assistance, is geared to private rather than commercial trailer transport, managing member Mark Cole says many of the fundamentals they preach apply to any kind of shipping.

"It's different when someone else is transporting your horse; you're depending upon them, and you hope they're responsible and well-trained. For the most part, commercial carriers are operated by reputable organizations; they're held to high standards and are on top of things like safety and maintenance," reported Cole.

USRider recommends all drivers have some awareness of the "dos and don'ts" of large animal emergency rescue. It also suggests that each truck have a layout diagram readily available to emergency workers, so they know the number of horses and humans on board, and where they're located, in the event of a rollover or an accident where the driver is incapacitated. Cole also recommends asking questions of your transport company (see sidebar).

Pieratt reports Sallee has multiple safe-

ty meetings with drivers throughout the year, and emergency training is part of the agenda. But in the event something does happen, they've got a plan.

"Each truck is equipped with an accident/injury kit, which includes emergency protocols and phone numbers," she said.

Contents include driver reporting forms, plus disposable cameras so that pictures can be taken immediately. They've also got 24/7 coverage at their office.

"If there's an emergency, the driver calls our office, and we'll follow-up with the appropriate emergency contact, whether that's the owner, trainer, or farm manager," she said.

Closed-circuit or video equipment to monitor the horses via the truck cab is becoming more common as a safety precaution for horses and humans; Manning says it's in all their trucks.

"Some people used to want attendants to ride with their horses; there's all kinds of reasons why that isn't a good idea," he cautioned. In order to reduce those requests and allay concerns about passenger welfare, they installed television on a trial basis a few years back and literally haven't looked back. "I was a driver, and sometimes you feel something a bit funny, so you have to decide whether you're going to pull over and stop to check it out. Now, you can just glance at the screen in the cab and

see if everyone's happy and OK, and just continue down the road."

I Heard It Through the Grapevine

The horse industry is pretty tight when it comes to information getting around, and racing circles seem even more closely knit. If something negative happens in the Thoroughbred world, news of it travels quickly; Van Leer feels that's something to bank on when it comes to hiring a transport company.

"It's best to go with word of mouth, and for owners to trust the people working for them, such as their boarding farm manager or trainer. They'll typically already have a shipping company they've worked with before and have had success with," she said.

The good news is that your chances of having a positive experience and a safely delivered horse are pretty reliable if you're selecting a van company used by others in the racing world. "There aren't that many van companies in a given area, and competition is pretty stiff," said Van Leer. "Most companies emphasize safety and proper handling of the horse, because if word gets around that a driver is using force, or that a company has rickety equipment, they'll put themselves out of business because people just flat won't use them." 

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