

# Big PURCHASE

**With the many options available on trailers today it may be hard to determine which ones are best for you. Three pros walk you through the choices.**

**S**o you've made the big decision to buy a trailer. Whether you have amped up your show commitments or gotten tired of paying by the ride, purchasing your own trailer will certainly gain you the independence and freedom to haul at your leisure. But where do you begin? With the myriad of options for trailers on the market today, you may feel overwhelmed before you even get started! Not to worry – we spoke with three trailer experts with years of experience in both selling and hauling. Read on to learn what you must know – and do – before the big purchase.

## **Where to Begin**

Whether you decide to search the Internet, follow advice from a friend, or visit a local dealership, our experts agree that finding a salesperson that has authentic experience hauling trailers is critical. Jim Kelly, a dealer at Sparta Chevrolet and Trailer Sales in Sparta, Michigan, says that purchasing a horse trailer from a salesperson with no real-life horse experience can be a recipe for disaster. "A salesman needs to know how horses load and be able to have an idea of the value of each product for what each horse needs," he says.

Donna Martin, co-owner of Blue Ridge Trailers in Ruckersville, Virginia, could not agree more. "You cannot sell trailers if you are not a horse person yourself and have not pulled trailers." Martin explains that by purchasing a trailer from a knowledgeable horse person, the customer is going to be asked all the right questions and led in a direction that will work for his or her horses and situation. "The seller needs to know what the trailer will be hauled with, what the customer will need depending on how big the horses are, and what the customer does with his or her horse – will you be working out of your trailer or simply hauling from point A to point B?" she says. "If you are selling horse trailers and are not a horse person, you lose all credibility, because customers want your best advice on 'what should I have, and why?'" Martin advises any potential buyers to get a good look at the options available by visiting local horse expos, shows, and really doing some homework. "You have to ask a lot of questions and get a lot of answers," she says.

Buying local, in addition to patronizing a local business, usually starts a good relationship with a dealership that can then help you in the future as far as service and resale. You can get a good



Photo Courtesy Congelosi Trailer Sales

feel for the kind of trailer you like and even sometimes take the trailer out for a test-haul. However, many buyers are turning to the Internet because of the unbeatable prices that can be found, even with the distance it might take to acquire the trailer. Because of the endless amount of information on the Internet, buyers need to be sure they are reading factual information and not just somebody's opinion – or worse – fiction. “Eighty-five percent of my business is Internet,” says Kelly. “Nowadays, prices are very good for those who are Internet-savvy and will travel to get their trailer. But, one word of caution when using those search engines – if the deal sounds too good to be true, it probably is.”

## Floor Plan

A majorly disputed option among horse people is that of layout and floor plan in a trailer. Included in the choices today are slant load, straight load, box stalls, open stall, trailers with options to convert to box stalls, and different ramp locations for ease of loading and unloading. With so many setups to choose from and so many differing opinions, how do you decide what you need for your trailer? Well, according to our experts, it all depends on what you plan on using your trailer for. “The real key is that they all serve many different purposes,” says Martin. “What needs to happen is that we keep in mind several key

criteria when choosing a potential trailer for our customers to consider.”

Because axles have a maximum width, each trailer will only ever have so much room from side to side. So, if you are trailering large horses, slant trailers will be much more difficult to utilize. The size of the horses being hauled is an important factor in deciding slant vs. straight load. Paul Congelosi, owner of Congelosi Trailer Sales in Montgomery, New York, has been working with horses all his life, many years as a farrier, and many years as a trailer mechanic. In the last few years, Congelosi has developed a lot of new and exciting floor plans. Congelosi agrees that size is a first and foremost factor that comes into play. “A person with a large warmblood will be better off with a straight load trailer because you will have more room for each horse,” he says.

It's also important to factor in what your trailer will be used for. Are you a foxhunter? Do you work out of your trailer at your destination, or do you haul in, drop the horses off at a stable and leave? “A slant load is going to be more efficient,” says Martin, “for people who are taking horses to a certain point and dropping them off, and for people who have smaller horses.” On the other end of the spectrum, if you are planning on working out of your trailer, a slant is not a good option, because if you need to get to a horse at the front of the trailer, you need to take off the horses behind horse number one. This is also



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an important fact in the case of an emergency. If horse number one is panicking and you need to get to his head, you need to go through other horses first, which, in an emergency situation, could be dangerous.

And, of course, there is the controversial question as to whether horses travel better in a slant or straight load. Some believe that when a trailer is stopping, horses put their weight on their front legs and need to be facing forward with more room to shift and to do so safely. Others believe that horses travel in a slightly slanted fashion to keep balanced anyway, challenging the objection of a slant trailer on behalf of the horses postural needs to render that point, well, moot.

Box stalls and side ramp doors are fantastic innovations for long-distance haulers and those who may be training youngsters to load. Martin applauds the innovation of a side ramp door, saying she uses one to train her babies to load and unload calmly and without hassle. "I bring them in the back, feed them, and walk them out the side door – and repeat. It's so safe." Side ramp doors are also safe for all horses, easing the unloading drama of backing off or having to turn around. Freely-open box stalls are utilized by many long-distance haulers, because the horses have more room to shift and load the parts of their bodies that they want to, while not feeling constricted.

Working with a respected, well-educated dealer can afford you the luxury of building your floor plan the way you want it if you do not see something already made that fits. "Some of the newer models we've created over the past few years help make trailers more versatile," says Congelosi. "We've developed a two-horse straight load with rear ramp and side ramp that also has a sliding divider in the rear so that you can load a carriage and then load your horses. Other models have been built with swinging gates, water systems, and camera systems to make traveling easier for people and their horses."

## Frame Materials

Even more controversial than slant vs. straight load is that of material makeup of the trailer. Today, trailers come in all sort of options for frame composition and body, and most of these options include aluminum and steel. Past issues of corrosion that have made headlines in the horse industry have possibly skewed the opinions of many, so word-of-mouth may not be the best idea for deciding what your trailer is composed of. What do our three experts agree on? While some materials may, in theory, have properties to make them last longer than others, you can only count on your trailer (regardless of frame materials) to last a long time with proper care and cleaning.

The biggest reason for trailer corrosion is improper maintenance of the trailer in between uses. When urine, manure, and shavings are left to sit, the mixture forms a chemical reaction that causes rust and corrosion. "You have to wash them out after use," says Kelly. "I see a lot of people bring in trailers that are just trashed, and it's really sad. Regardless of material makeup, urine corrodes. It's a fact." Storing a trailer on wet grass will also add to degeneration of the composition, due to the high moisture content. In a perfect world, trailer owners would all be able to store their trailers inside on a dry floor – but in the real world, being diligent about moving out mats and washing away the waste after use will make all the difference.

Donna Martin says that while maintenance is critical for any trailer, she does have certain compositions she prefers over others. Martin advises new buyers to look into galvanized steel frame (zinc) materials in trailers. "The zinc has properties that are highly rust-resistant. You may get surface rust, which is unsightly but will never affect the quality of the frame – no dangerous corrosion." Most zinc trailers are a bit less expensive than aluminum, and have a little bit lower profile so that the trailer doesn't have to sit as high off the ground. Her all-time favorite, an all-aluminum frame, will, with proper maintenance, last a very long



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Photo: Lindsay Rose



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time. "I tell my clients that if they want to know 150 years from now, if kept correctly, it will still be working, to go with this. It's also nice for large trailers as far as weight goes."

Not on the favorites list for Martin include tubular steel frames (painted steel), which many inexpensive aluminum trailers are made with. "Moisture gets caught inside the steel and begins to rot if it's not being cleaned or it's being stored on grass," she explains. Martin also advises against powder coated steel frames, because when there is a joint moved under vibration, water is able to leak in and rotting may occur.

## Tack Rooms, Living Quarters, Lighting and Airflow

Cost is usually the largest deciding factor for those wondering about a tack room or living quarters in their new trailers, but for those considering living quarters, Martin advises really thinking about how much they will actually use it. "The problem with living quarters is that for it to be really efficient, you need to be alright with a slant style trailer," she explains. "You are able to mitigate it somehow – make the trailer longer, taller, etc. so that you can have a straight load – but it will become bigger and more expensive that way. So you really should plan on using it a lot to make it worth it." With living quarters comes more work as far as keeping it cleaned out, winterized in some cases, checking the caulking for leaks, and making sure to keep bees and bugs out of the furnace tube and vents.

On the flipside, living quarters can be a wonderful addition for those who are long-distance haulers, or going to shows where they want to be as close to their horses as possible without hassle. "In addition to all the ease the living quarters can bring, if you do not already own a second home, there are some tax advantages and write-offs," says Kelly. And, manufacturers have gotten increasingly more aggressive on pricing, making living quarters more affordable than ever. If you decide to settle on a tack room space, there are tons of options to choose from as far as sizing of the space, window arrangement, air vents, saddle rack/bridle rack arrangements, and even floor materials.

Regardless of living quarters or tack room, our experts agree that a window in the front space of the trailer, with venting capabilities, is a key factor in the overall airflow importance in trailering. Kelly advises on looking for bigger windows, side windows, windows with drop down bars, and windows on the rear door, while Martin adds fans, stock trailers (when environmentally appropriate), and insulated ceilings to her list of important factors.

Trailers are held to a requirement of outside lighting by the Federal Department of Transportation, and the size of the trailer determines the amount of lights necessary. "As for optional lighting, you should have load lights in the rear if you are worried about loading or unloading your horses at night, and also, you'll want lights in the horse area and dressing room (if you have one) as well," Congelosi says. Most lights nowadays are light-emitting diode (LED), which are brighter and last longer (but are more expensive). They are a better choice than incandescent if you are planning on keeping your trailer long-term.

If you are interested in contacting any of our experts with questions on your new trailer search, feel free to call Paul Congelosi at 845-361-2246, Donna Martin at 434-985-4151, or Jim Kelly at 616-887-1791. ■