



**International Equine Science Meeting 2008  
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**Invited Presentation**

**The Welfare of Horses During Transport**

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The transport of animals „causes more episodes of acute stress than any other common husbandry practice.“<sup>1</sup> The standard horse trailer requiring the horse to face the direction of travel contradicts the horses’ behavioural, physiological, and physical needs. It limits the horse’s ability to maintain its balance off its forequarters, lower its head to clear its respiratory tract, avoid activity in its hind area, and for certain .male horses, urinate at will

Market responses to transport risks include tranquilisers, herbal remedies, tail guards, head bumpers, shipping boots, face guards, padded blankets, anchored slings to keep the horse upright, and a newly patented harness for one-person loading.<sup>2</sup> Electric shock is sometimes recommended to punish the scrambling, kicking, or falling horse as it attempts to cope with acceleration, braking, cornering, trailer sway, driver behavior, and changes of direction. These are prescriptive—reacting to a .symptom— rather than preventive measures

Despite protective devices, horses present at veterinary clinics with head, chest, and leg injuries, colics, choke, diarrhea, myositis,<sup>3</sup> and fever associated with transport. „Emotional distress“ has been reported in horses transported conventionally for thirty minutes.<sup>4</sup>

Reports of handlers injured during the loading and unloading process are common. An American Horse Shows Association survey found a significant proportion of injuries to arriving performance horses was due to standard transport practices.<sup>5, 6</sup>

Standard horse trailers are built with the same concept used to transport dead weight. The live cargo, like any solid equipment, is expected to remain stationary in transit. Live weight cannot remain stationary during transit. The result is injuries and loss of trailer and tow vehicle control.<sup>7</sup>





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The disconnect between standard trailer practices and safety challenged New Zealand horseman, David J. Holmes, to study a better way.<sup>8</sup>

Holmes had suffered a nearly fatal crash while hauling a racehorse in a standard two-horse trailer. The horse had smashed rump restraints, thrown its weight toward the rear of the trailer, and forced the driver to lose steering control as the weight shifted rearwards. The rig overturned as it approached a bridge, nearly plunging into a river. Holmes, an automotive engineer, horseman, licensed heavy goods haulier, and tractor-trailer (articulated lorry) instructor, applied his experience to a study of the anatomy and balancing mechanisms of horses at rest. He observed horses in their natural relaxed stance, noting that the sixty percent or more of the body weight was ahead of the girth. The position required a forward lean. He concluded that a horse had what he called „automatic balance“ permitting it to sleep while standing.<sup>9</sup> After numerous experiments observing untethered horses voluntarily facing the rear and positioning themselves directly

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