

# THE *Long* HAUL

MARIO AND DEE ESPIN OF SANTA FE EQUINE  
OFFER THEIR TOP TRANSPORT TIPS

• BY SHELBY O'NEILL

Whether you are transporting horses yourself or hiring the services of a company with an eight-horse trailer, there are some basic tips that can help ensure a smooth journey.

Strangely enough, Mario Espin has his early days as a bareback and bronc rider to thank for his four-decades-and-going-strong horse transport business. He rode the rodeo circuit in the 1970s and '80s, which gave him the opportunity to haul his first horses.

"Bronc riders would go to the rodeo with just a pickup truck, and some ropers asked if I would take some horses from Idaho to Bend, Oregon, for them," Espin recalled. "So I hitched up a trailer to my F-150, left Lewiston, Idaho, and drove to Bend, Oregon. I got bucked off that day, and a professional bronc rider's paycheck looks like zero when you get bucked off. These guys paid me \$300 to haul their horses. That was the first time I was ever hired, and a light bulb went off in my head."

From there, word of Espin's nascent transport business grew until eventually his rodeo gigs ended with hauling horses into the barn instead of mounting a bronc. With 25 to 30 rodeos in one month alone, Espin worked hard and saved up to buy his first stock trailer in 1979.

"As I got older, I needed a part-two career," he said. "I knew how to travel from the rodeos, and I discovered early on that racehorses travel frequently. Little by little, I became a racehorse transport guy."

Initially his transport schedule revolved around taking Quarter Horses out of the Montana area to New Mexico for racing or to Florida and Kentucky for breeding. It was trips to the latter two states that inspired Espin to dream of more possibilities for his growing business.

"Seeing the modern-day Thoroughbred farms in Ocala and Lexington opened my eyes to the price point of the Thoroughbred industry," he said. "I was already living in the Arctic cold climate of Montana, which has two seasons—August and winter. All my customers in Ocala were in T-shirts, shorts and flip-flops. Going over two mountain passes in Montana, I realized it was time to make a transition to Florida."





## Mario and Dee Espin

While in the early days Espin's business was simply known as Kit Horse Transport (owing to his nickname of Kit), the move to Florida inspired a new official name for the business—Santa Fe Horse Transport—in honor of Lake Santa Fe, where Espin set up his new home base. Soon, Espin married Dee, and she joined the business too, tackling the behind-the-scenes work while Mario was out on the road.

"I think it's fun when we Google our customers and find out who they are," Dee said. "We'll look up a horse's name and see that horse has made over a million dollars. It's always fun to see a different side of who it is we're handling. We watch them run and send texts back and forth when they're at the Kentucky Derby or the Belmont or the Preakness."

In fact, Santa Fe has been the transport of choice for many horses that compete on the Triple Crown trail.

"My favorite thing about the business is handling the high-quality athletes that I deal with," Espin said. "I have a very niche business on purpose. We want to do what we do very well for a few customers versus trying to be everyone to everybody. We want to be the Rolex of watches, not the Timex. Some of my customers have been with me for more than 30 years."

The Espins' success has allowed them to expand their transport business over the years to include appraisals and bloodstock agent services under the Santa Fe Equine banner.

"Everyone knows we attend these sales on a regular basis, and customers needed two things—a good eye for horses and someone

who's there who can take the million-dollar horse they bought someplace," Espin said. "We tied those things together."

## Find the Right Transporter

The Espins have specialized in Texas, Louisiana and Oklahoma horses with weekly trips from Ocala to Louisiana and Texas, as well as Oklahoma and New Mexico, depending on the season. With that many trips under their belts, the Espins are well acquainted with all the ins and outs of interstate transport and happily offer advice for anyone who might be wondering how to find a good horse transport company.

"For new horse owners that are new to transporting, look for reputable companies," Dee said. "Look for people who are insured, and don't feel stupid about asking whatever questions you want. This is your prize horse. Check that the business is fully DOT (Department of Transportation) compliant."

She also pointed out that prices that seem too good to be true probably are.

"People will get quotes on shipping a horse, and it's just a pickup

truck with a little back trailer that's just going to go pedal to the metal and not stop," she said. "They don't care if your horse drinks or not. They don't care that your horse hasn't gone to the bathroom for 12 hours and could mean that it's colicking."

To avoid bad situations like those, Santa Fe has a facility at the Evangeline Training Center in Carencro, Louisiana, so that horses are only in the transport van for no more than 11 hours at a time.

"We have our own stalls kept under lock and key and unload there," Mario said. "It allows me to get proper sleep. We feed at 5 a.m., load by 6 a.m. to maximize the cool hours of the day. We can be to Houston by 10 a.m., and the horse isn't stressed. Also, remember not to use Google Maps as your idea for how long shipping is going to take. Those times are for a Honda Civic driving at the speed limit, not for a horse trailer."



Courtesy Santa Fe Equine

## Patience is one of the keys to loading a horse.

## Getting Ready to Go

When it comes to getting horses prepared for the trip, Espin suggested starting with the basics.

"Paperwork is always number one," he said. "Florida is the toughest state to transport in and out of. You need a blood certificate and a Coggins, which must be marked or with photos. The photo must match. The temperature of the horse is a must, too. If we omit any of those things,

it's only going to cause issues at the Florida border."

Espin's second tip for transport is true whether it's a racehorse or a pleasure horse in the back of the transport van.

"A naked horse travels a whole lot better than a horse that shows up with all that stuff you bought off the magazine," he said. "Do not put on shipping boots, and do not ship them with anything on them, including tail wraps, mane wraps or leg wraps. Because my horses are traveling no less than 700 miles, you do not want to leave leg wraps on them. Naked horses travel best.

"They're just horses; they don't know they're expensive, and all those other things can cause injuries, so just let the horse be a horse," he added. "Also, do not oil horses. Save yourself \$100 and a vet call. Don't grain a horse before they're picked up. Let them be. I personally believe that 24 hours before, give them the good quality hay they've been on all along and then a small reduction the night before on grain. We want bellies to be as unlikely to colic as possible, and they're not going to starve to death. We keep hay in front of them the whole time."

### Getting There Safe and Sound

The preparation tips above echo Santa Fe's primary philosophy, which is that it's all about the horse, not about the time of arrival.

"If your horse steps off the trailer and she can only walk on three legs, that's all you're going to remember, not that she was on time," Espin pointed out.

To keep horses safe and comfortable throughout the journey, Santa Fe uses floor-to-ceiling partitions with three-quarter-inch thick rubber mats that make

up the bottom quarter of the panel, so horses can't damage their shoes or hooves.

"The horse isn't going to have a gash because there isn't any metal exposed," Espin said. "No more than an hour after we've loaded, we unclip everybody, and now the horses are free to move their heads up or down. We don't keep horses tied to the trailer during the trip. Some of them are immature, and it's critical that we keep them looking forward. No horse can see another horse, so they're looking out the window, like tourists."

The trailer is equipped with cameras with wide-angle lenses that cover every compartment, so Espin is able to see each horse in its entirety throughout the duration of the trip. Because he makes these trips so often, he knows the perfect quiet and safe places to stop, drop the windows and let the horses socialize.

"I love on them between their eyes and make eye contact with them all," Espin said. "I always wear glasses and my hat, so they learn to recognize me as the person who is going to take care of them. I give them each a flake of high-quality Timothy hay out of Arizona, and they eat it like candy. We hang buckets of water and talk to them, quieting the nervous ones. This settles the horses almost immediately."

This step is repeated every three to four hours throughout the journey to keep the horses happy and—above all else—healthy. That's why, according to Espin, the success or failure of any transport can be measured very simply and easily.

"Owners who are transporting their horses need to pay attention to four things," he said. "Your horse needs to eat, drink, pee and poop. If your horse is doing those four things during travel, your horse is traveling fine."

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