

Catching Cattle and Training Cattle to be Handled

Our topics for this week are:

- Catching cattle and calves
- Flanking a calf
- Training cattle to be handled

Catching Cattle

The degree and frequency of catching and handling cattle varies greatly, as do the reasons. Freshened dairy cattle are handled twice every day for milking, but beef cattle are usually handled just twice a year. Calves are castrated, vaccinated, and ear tagged in the spring. In the fall, the entire herd is vaccinated and calves are given boosters two to three weeks later. Disbudding of horned cattle is performed at 2 to 6 weeks of age. Castration should be performed within the first weeks of birth. Castration may be done on weaned calves but should be done in conjunction with local anesthetics. Dehorning is performed on older cattle as soon as possible after 6 weeks of age. Individual cows may have to be restrained and handled at other times to treat illnesses or injuries, check for pregnancy, or artificially inseminate.

Prior to catching cattle, an inspection of all fences, gates, alleyways, and restraint chutes used for catching should be conducted. Weakened points in the facilities should be repaired and distractions to the movement of cattle removed. The facilities should have been previously cleaned and disinfected, appropriate to the type of facilities. The cattle to be caught should be visually inspected prior to catching them. Lameness, labored respirations, lack of appetite, depressed attitude, or other abnormal signs could indicate a need for special handling or rescheduled handling.

The most common approach to catching cattle is to herd them quietly toward or along an enclosure and into an alleyway that goes toward a squeeze chute (British term is “crush”) with a headgate (British term is “head bail”). This should be done without a lot of excitement and using soothing voice. The herd’s collective flight zone should be approached at 45 degrees from behind, moving toward a shoulder of one of the dominant cattle in the center of the herd.

Capture and Restraint of Calves

Owners should select and train for gentle calves. Weaned calves must be handled gently in order to have gentle adult cattle later. Mother cows can be maternally aggressive and should always be removed from the calves before handling the calves. Therefore, handlers should always work in pairs when sorting and catching calves.

Capturing a Calf

Calves can be caught by hand if herded with its mother into a pen and then the mother is sorted into another small pen. Small calves may be caught in large pens with a leg crook on a long pole. Branding, castration, and disbudding of calves can be efficiently done by roping calves if handlers are skilled in using a lariat. A Nord Fork is a head restraint for calves that are caught by a heeler (person on horseback who ropes the hind legs). The Nord fork is staked and restrains the

calf's head without risk of choking.

Moving a Calf

Small calves can be moved by putting an arm in front of their chest and the other arm around their rump. They are then picked up and carried, or they are walked forward while blocking backward or side movements. Larger calves must be herded in ways similar to adult cattle.

Standing Restraint

A calf is backed into a corner by the handler. The handler straddles its neck facing the calf's nose. Access to the jugular vein with both hands can be gained by bending over and pushing the calf's head to the side and held with the handler's elbow.

Flanking a Calf

Flanking a calf up to 200 lb. can be useful in treating the umbilicus (navel), tattooing, branding, ear-tagging, or castration. Small calves can be laid down on their side in the same manner as putting a dog in lateral restraint by reaching over the calf's neck and the flank and grasping the front and hind leg closest to the handler's legs. The calf is lifted up and its legs rotated away from the handler while letting its body slide down the handler's legs. It is held on its side using the handler's forearm on its neck and holding onto its lower front and rear legs.

For larger calves, the handler should stand next to the calf's left side with his left arm under its neck. The right hand grasps its right flank skin and the left hand is moved to grasp the right foreleg at its knee. The handler's right knee is pushed into the calf's left flank. The calf is lifted in timing with its attempt to jump out of the grasp and its feet rotated away from the handler. The calf is continued to be held as it slides down the handler's right leg. To continue to hold a calf down, a handler places a knee on its neck while bending over and holding the upper foreleg.

To tie a downed calf on its left side, a handler straddles the calf's rump in kneeling position and his right knee is placed behind the calf's hocks. His left hand holds the calf's right front leg and his right hand ties the legs. To tie the legs, the upper front leg is held in backward extension and a constricting loop on a short cord (pigging string) is placed on the leg. Both hindlegs are picked up while pulling the foreleg back. The pigging string is used to make wraps around all 3 legs and half-hitches to tie the 3 legs together. Both front legs are not tied due to the risk of impairing respiration.

Another method of tying a downed calf is to use a rope about twice as long as the calf. Both hind legs are tied with an end of the rope using half hitches. The middle part of the rope is crossed beneath the calf and placed over the calf's neck. If adjusted correctly, both hind legs should be pulled forward and prevent the calf from rising to its feet. Castration can be performed with the calf in this position.

Larger calves laid on their side may need to be restrained by two people. One person restrains the head with a knee on the calf's neck while holding the uppermost foreleg in flexed position. The second handler holds and stretches the upper hind leg while sitting behind the calf and bracing a foot against the back of the calf's other thigh. When releasing the calf, the hindlegs should be released first.

Packing Groups of Calves

Calves can be crowded into alleyways as the only restraint for procedures that require minimal

restraint, such as vaccinations and pour-on insecticides. Calves can also be drenched (given liquid medications) moving through the group from front to back. Treated individuals are marked with livestock paint crayons to prevent double treatment or missing a treatment.

Training Cattle to be Handled

All cattle should be habituated to being handled by humans with short, less than 30 minute, practice exercises for reasons of safety of humans and cattle and for reasons of maintaining optimum productivity in the production of beef or milk. As with other species, whenever a handler is around cattle, he is training them for good or bad future responses whether or not he realizes it. Handling needs to be consistent among all handlers and from one handling to the next.

Cattle, when handled often can be moved by hand motions, body language, and verbal directions. Walking among cattle when they are weanling calves with no purpose other than to have them adjust to a handler's presence makes a great difference in how they can be handled later. If dogs or horses may be used to handle cattle, they should be led as a handler walks among the cattle. Cattle are more likely to remain calm if exposed in the future to what has become routine sights, sounds, and smells. When mingling with them, the handler should wear the same hat, call them with the same call, talk or sing to them in the same way, and otherwise act in the same manner. Direct stares, which could be perceived by cattle as a predator stare, should be avoided. Mingling among the cattle by handlers will assist in assessing individual cow behavior. The handler should stand with his side toward the cattle and his arms by his side to minimize his appearance until the cattle become more adjusted to his presence. When a handler stands in one spot, he should make natural movements with his arms and shoulders. Staying completely still and staring is an image of stalking to a prey animal.

Training is accomplished by putting a small group of calves or untrained cows in a holding pen. After allowing them to settle for 20 minutes, the handler slowly moves them around the inside of the pen's perimeter by briefly invading their flight zone at about 45 to 60 degrees behind their collective point of balance. Only the edge of the flight zone is worked. Invading the flight zone will cause cattle to run, scatter, or fight. The handler should occasionally stop the cattle in a corner and allows them to rest for a couple of minutes. After the brief rest, they are moved again and stopped in another corner. This exercise is done for up to 30 minutes. Movement should be practiced both directions and should be repeated daily for at least 3 days. Refresher moving exercises should be done monthly for at least 3 consecutive days. A primary goal of the exercises is to move the cattle with them remaining at a walk. More than two handlers in a pen is confusing to the cattle. One handler moves the cattle and the other works the gates.

If cattle will be moved by horseback handlers, practice cattle moving exercises on horseback similar to walking handler exercises should be done. If horseback handlers move cattle, there should be no walking handlers in the pen due to the likelihood of those on foot being trampled.

Dairy cows have calves to become freshened, but the milk produced is for human consumption. Heifer calves are moved in the first day of birth to hutches with small pens. Replacement heifers remain in individual pens for the first 8 weeks of life and are fed a commercial milk replacer. Surplus or market calves are sold at 2 weeks of age. Some bull calves may be kept for veal production, remain in individual pens or stalls until sent to slaughter

by 20 weeks of age. Replacement heifers, reared in hutches, are not given the opportunity to learn how to follow a herd. They learn to approach handlers for food and mental enrichment and may become aggressive which can be problematic when they become older and must be herded. Therefore, young heifers need to be grouped by 9 weeks with other calves and taught to be herded.

Introduction of heifers to a milking parlor should be quiet and gentle. Food should be provided. If there is an objection to the first handling of the udder (which should be brief and gentle), a tail jack, chest twitch, or flank rope or clamp can be used until the heifer tolerates the handling. The release from restraint should be delayed until after the heifer quietly accepts the food, being in the parlor, and receiving gentle handling. Release from restraint should be gradual and blended with exhibiting calmer behavior. Palpation for insemination or pregnancy diagnosis should not be done in milking parlors. Nothing should occur in a milking parlor that might cause a heifer to avoid going into the parlor in the future.

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. The most common method of catching cattle is herding into a collection pen that leads to a squeeze chute with a head catch.**
- 2. When flanking a calf to restrain, it should be slid down the handler's legs to be gently laid on its side.**
- 3. Dairy calves are raised in solitude, requiring handling training for being herded at around 9 weeks of age.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.