

Using a Lariat

Our topics for this week are:

- Types of lariats
- Parts of a lariat loop
- The Thrown Loop and Hoolihan Loop
- A loop on a stick

Throwing a lariat loop is sometimes necessary for capturing livestock and horses. Some handlers consider lariats as the least stressful option for untrained animals and others consider lariats as the last resort for capturing an animal. Opinions are affected by the handler's skill in using a lariat. The proficient use of lariats must be routinely practiced. Ability of the handler is the dominant factor in how soon, how often, or if throwing a lariat is used in capturing animals. The skill must be acquired by much practice on inanimate objects before ever attempted on animals.

Poor use of a lariat can instill fear in animals of human approach. Injuries to an eye can result, especially with metal quick release hondas. A leg may be accidentally caught increasing the risk of a broken leg or neck. On the other hand, throwing a lariat loop can be the only practical available means of capturing range cattle or untamed horses. The correct rope in the hands of an experienced roper can be less stressful on managing calves than alleys, chutes, and head catches. Cattle handling using lariats is not rodeo calf and steer roping. These sports are exciting, flashy, and sometimes inhumane events that are for entertainment only. Good cattle and horse handling with ropes is slow, quiet, and can be boring to watch.

Throwing lariats originated with the Spanish, but two variations gradually developed separately in California and Texas. Common lariats used in Texas-style roping are stiff ropes 5/16 or 3/8 inches in diameter and 28, 30, or 35 feet long. Roping from horseback is done with saddle horns with small diameters designed for tying. Californio-style roping is done with softer ropes at greater distances. Cattle are quietly roped from outside their flight zones. Leather reatas or Mexican maquey ropes 50 to 60 feet long are used for Californio-style roping. If done on horseback, saddles are used with large diameter saddle horns (gourd horn) that are more effective for dallying (wrapping the rope without tying). Dallying the rope is easier on the cattle being handled than tying. Small loops are thrown with speed in Texas due to the brushy environment in south Texas and the need to catch cattle quickly. Big loops are used in California and Basin and Mountain states where the land is more open and better permits large slowly tossed loops.

Throwing a rope while the handler is on the ground is used to capture and sort cattle when chutes and other handling facilities are not available. It may also be used as an early tool in horse training. Prior to throwing a lariat from the ground, a stout stationary object should be selected as a potential dally post, and gloves should be worn. Smaller animals may be restrained by taking the rope behind the handler's seat (a half dally). This allows the handler to grip with the half wrap on his body and to push backwards with his legs rather than try to pull with his arms and maintain just his hand grip on the rope.

Anatomy of a Lariat Loop

Lariat loops (nooses) consist primarily of a base, tip, honda, and spoke. The **base** is the top part of a loop and the bottom portion is the **tip**. The **spoke** is the portion of the rope that has passed through the honda and extends to the portion that is held with the base by the throwing hand. The **bottom strand** of the loop is the section of rope from the honda side of the base to the tip. The **top strand** is the section of loop from the tip to where the rope goes through the honda.

Hondas on lariats should be rope, rawhide, or light weight metal. Heavy metal hondas on ropes to be thrown can injure the animal's eyes, ears, or facial bones. Metal hondas are useful in training horses and other animals to give under pressure. When the animal quits pulling on the rope, there is an immediate release (reward). Quick release hondas unsnap, preventing the need to loosen the rope first. These hondas can be useful in restraining cattle, but they can be dangerous to handler's fingers if the handler uses his finger to unclasp the latch when freeing the animal. Rather than putting a finger in the honda to release the snap, a rawhide string to pull the snap open should be used.

The Thrown Loop (Tossed Loop)

Occasionally there is no other realistic option than roping for capture, particularly with cattle. If cattle are to be caught with a lariat, they should first be herded into the smallest holding area that is strong enough to contain a group of pushing cattle. A dally (snubbing) post should be identified and its strength inspected before attempting to catch a cow or calf.

In preparation of a catch, the group is approached at an angle quietly on foot with a loop ready and held low, dragged on the ground, and held slightly behind the right leg for a right-handed roper. The spoke should be held to extend about one-fourth down the top strand. The toss is a silent, smooth upward movement of the arm with a slight flip of the wrist. The loop should make one-half turn by the time it reaches its target with the tip of the loop falling over the target. The honda should fall in front of the target and not hit it.

Swinging the rope before a toss will frighten cattle and must be avoided if they are not yet agitated. If the cattle are not quietly settled and run from the quiet approach of the handler, a thrown loop must have momentum to quickly get to the animal to be caught. One swing of the loop is generally enough. The longer the rope is swung around the handler the more frightened the cattle will become. As soon as the animal is caught, the handler has to pull it in a circle close enough to make a dally (loops/wraps) around the dally post. Once caught and snubbed, the animal is driven toward the dally post while the slack is taken up in the rope. If the reason for catching the animal requires that it be held for more than a minute, a halter should be placed on the animal and tied to the post. The neck loop should then be loosened or removed to prevent the animal from choking.

Ropes with quick release metal hondas can be tossed, but they should not be swung and thrown. The weight of the honda unbalances the loop and can cause injury to the animal if thrown with accelerated momentum.

The Hoolihan

Because of their quick movements and long neck, horses can easily duck and avoid a thrown lariat loop if they see it coming directly toward their head. However, range horses that are broke to ride are trained to be gathered in rope corrals and stand side by side with their rumps to a wrangler (western-style horse handler) while he selects and ropes individual horses for work. This is much safer than milling among a herd 20 or more riding horses, called a **remuda** in the

Southwestern U.S. (*cavy* in the Great Basin states), early in the morning. The type of loop thrown to select the horses from a remuda is called a *hoolihan*, which is thrown off the index finger after swinging the loop smoothly and quietly around the roper's body. The hoolihan gently drop down over the horse's head from behind.

A right-handed roper holds the loop over his left shoulder. This allows a large loop to be held close to the body and not be dragged on the ground. The spoke should be held so that it extends about three-fourths down the top strand. The throw begins with smoothly swinging the loop clockwise around the body. The loop is released when the right hand is over the handler's head in approximate line with the left ear. The loop should make one-half turn and the tip should drop over the target. Only the best, most experienced ropers catch horses from a remuda for the other wranglers. Horses unaccustomed to ropes should only be caught with a rope in a small round pen with solid, high walls by a skilled roper.

The hoolihan loop can also be used to catch cattle in a pen. The advantage of a smooth, quiet swing to develop momentum and a large loop may be helpful in catching cattle in some situations. However, more room is needed to swing the loop around the thrower's body than required of many other loops.

Loop on a Stick (Uurga)

During the 13th century, the Mongolian Empire battled knights in armor using a lariat loop on a long pole called the uurga. They would catch and pull the knights off their horses where they were more vulnerable to attack. The uurga is a traditional horse capture tool of Mongolian horsemen.

Spanish colonialists used a long handed pole with a semicircular hocking knife on the end called a "desjarretadera" to cut the Achilles tendon to capture cattle to be slaughtered. Throwing of reatas (leather ropes not on sticks) later replaced the desjarretadera for catching most untamed livestock.

Still today, the loop on a stick, an improvised uurga, can sometimes be more effective and simpler than throwing a lariat. A telescoping pole, available at most home care stores, can be easily transported and adjusted to desirable lengths. Attaching the loop with Velcro strips will hold the loop open until quietly placed over its target. The pole can then be removed and the animal captured by dallies around a stout post or running the tail of the lariat through a tie ring.

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

- **Rodeo roping is simply for entertainment and not the type of roping needed by good animal handlers.**
- **Proper roping of cattle is typically smooth, quiet, and without attempts by cattle to flee.**
- **Dallying the working end of a rope is safer and more humane than tying fast to objects since pressure can be released to the cow or calf at optimum times.**
- **The Thrown Loop and Hoolihan are roping techniques that require little to no swinging of the loop before catching cattle or horses.**
- **A loop on a stick or lasso pole is a undramatic means of catching cattle and horses requiring no throwing skill.**

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.