

Training Cattle to be Handled

Our topics for this week are:

- **Preparations to move cattle on foot or horseback**
- **Training dairy heifers for herding**
- **Desensitizing cattle to chutes and headgates**

All cattle should be habituated to being handled by humans with short, less than 30-minute, practice exercises for reasons of safety for 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.

When handled often, cattle can be moved by hand motions, body language, and verbal directions. Training is accomplished by putting a small group of calves or untrained cows in a holding pen and 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 allow 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 in both directions and should be repeated daily for at least three days. Refresher moving exercises should be done monthly for at least three 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 at the same time is confusing to the cattle. One handler moves the cattle and the other works the gates.

Handling by Horseback

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

Basics of Training Cattle to be Handled

Some basics of training cattle include walking among cattle when they are weanling calves with no purpose other than to have them adjust to a handler's presence. This 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. When mingling with cattle, 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 as in the last training period. 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 moves, he should make natural movements with his arms and shoulders at a normal pace.

Dairy Heifers

Dairy cows have calves in order to become freshened, but since the milk production is for human consumption, heifer calves are moved in the first day after birth to hutches with small pens. Surplus or market calves are sold at 2 weeks of age. Some bull calves may be kept for veal production. They will remain in individual pens or stalls until sent to slaughter by 20 weeks of age. Replacement heifers remain in individual pens for the first 8 weeks of life and are fed a commercial milk replacer. 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.

Training for Chutes and Headgates

Although it is an uncommon procedure in the U.S., cattle should be trained for restraint in squeeze chutes and headgates

The first step is to allow the cattle to walk through the chute several times as quietly as possible. The next step is to stop cattle in the chute without squeezing them and then release. Cattle are stopped in the chute and the sides squeezed gently and released without any other procedures

being done on them. After each training step, the cattle should be fed a small amount of grain or choice hay.

When procedures (ear tagging, vaccinations, castration, etc.) are performed on them in the future, release from the chute should be timed for when they are not struggling. Otherwise, they are likely to run out and have a perception that they have escaped. Unstressed cattle come out of a squeeze chute and headgate at a walk or slow trot. Cattle that are normally released from a squeeze chute with a headgate should be penned with other cattle and provided with water, salt, molasses blocks, or choice hay to calm down before release into a pasture.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

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

- 1. Cattle should be trained for herding and being in a chute and headgate.**
- 2. Dairy heifers have no experience following other cattle and must be taught while young how to be herded.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources. My new spiral-bound handbook, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling* was recently published and is available from all major science book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 150 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.