



These Brahman heifers are ready for school. With the proper handling, they can be a rancher's dream.

All photos provided by Herman Detering.

Ranch Safety through Low-Stress Cattle Handling

By Herman Detering

Ranch safety through reducing stress on cattle is a major reason for the increased focus on handling in the industry today. Low-stress demonstrations and workshops can be found on the agenda of cattle raisers' associations, in college programs and in presentations by an increasing number of independent rancher-clinicians.

The primary rationale offered for using low-stress handling is to avoid the harmful effect of psychological stress on cattle. However a major benefit of this approach is safety in handling, not only for the handler, but for the cattle and the facilities.

Ultimately, any safe and effective method of handling animals must be based on the nature of the animals being handled.

Cattle are prey animals and like other prey animals share a psychology that normally turns confine-

ment by humans into a highly stressful situation. This results in flighty or aggressive behavior. We can minimize this response by learning to handle cattle in a "prey-like" or non-predatory way. This involves handling cattle in a way that is similar to the manner in which they move, rank and control each other.

The reduction of a fight-or-flight response and the development of calm movement are the keys to safe cattle handling. In this article, I will explore the reasons for this and discuss how safety can be increased by adopting low-stress handling methods.

The "Jekyll and Hyde" nature of cattle

Cattle are commonly spoken of as being either gentle or to some degree wild or just plain "crazy." While this can be convenient shorthand to describe their behavior, the truth is that all cattle have a dual

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nature. They are both wild and sociable and their behavior can change in a flash.

Another way to think about this is to think of cattle as “fear on four legs.” Like all prey animals, cattle are frightened in the presence of predators until they learn that it is safe to relax.

The wild behavior of cattle, arising from the right side of their brain, expresses their instinctual response to fear. The calm behavior we often see as they graze in a pasture emerges from the left side of their brain, the side that contains their abilities to learn and to make choices.

What is not often understood is that both of these sides remain active in the gentlest and wildest of cattle. This is why cattle do not make reliable pets. They can and will shift from calm left-brain behavior to dangerous right-brain instinctual behavior whenever they feel threatened.

If you decide to work at low-stress handling, remember that what has been said about horses is equally true of cattle: Inside every wild cow is a gentle one and inside every gentle cow is a wild one. If you ignore this truth, you both endanger yourself and compromise your effectiveness as a handler.

Some particularly dangerous situations

While cattle can shift in a split second from being calm to being dangerously excited, it takes about 20 to 30 minutes for them to return from being excited to a state of calm. When they are excited it is not possible to teach or apply low-stress techniques. It is much like being in a classroom when a student pulls a knife; it is

no longer a teaching situation, but one of survival when you do whatever is necessary for safety.

With excited cattle, the handler should leave the pen area and re-approach them after they have had time to settle down.

If they remain agitated after

a half an hour or so, they need help to calm down. They need to be distracted from their fears through slowly pressuring them to move around the pen or to move from one pen to another.

It is very likely that a handler will bring about a violent right-



Females to the left seem to stroll away from Detering's proximity. The female on his right seems to be more willing to investigate his outstretched arm and allow him to come closer.



Detering “draws” this heifer to him by advancing into and retreating from her flight zone until she allows him to stand a few feet in front of her. Eventually, she will extend her nose to his outstretched arm.



In this series of three photos, heifers in an alleyway are slightly pressured by Detering's movement until they walk calmly around him to the other end of the pen.



Always work both sides of the animal, Detering says. This allows them to get used to having a handler on both sides of them.



Here, Detering has increased the pressure by moving to the center of the pen. He will work here until they can walk by calmly.

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brain reaction if he overcrowds cattle or forces them to move around on slippery footing. This causes panic because they feel out of control.

Also, cornered, isolated, injured and sick cattle are prone to react violently out of the same sensed threat to their survival.

Other highly dangerous situations include working with cows that have newborn calves; cattle intent on getting to feed; cattle when ranking each other; or bulls in mating pursuit of a cow. Usually the safe procedure in these cases is to get out of the way!

However, you can develop some control in these situations if you have previously developed a leadership relationship with them.

Control in dangerous situations is all a matter of degree. In these cases, early intervention is far more effective than intervening after cattle are deeply involved in instinctually driven behavior. However, on several occasions, I have been able to separate bulls that were fighting. This was possible only because I had previously developed a trusting and dominant relationship with each bull.

To maximize safety in all ranching situations, there are a few things you should keep in mind. Try not to work cattle when you are tired, in a hurry or upset. Always express a determined "this is the way it is going to be" attitude, but never anger.

Discipline cattle and shape their movement through applying modulated prey-like pressure,

but never punish them. Prey animals do not respond in a positive way to punishment from a predator. It merely confirms their deepest suspicions of us.

Suggestions for getting started with low-stress handling

I suggest that you get started with weanlings in a fairly small pen. Once you have learned the basics here, you can move on to larger areas and more mature cattle.

I start out by moving slowly among six to eight weanlings, trying to get them to “yield their feet” to me as calmly as possible.

What I am doing is beginning a slow “advance and retreat” at the edge of their flight zone. I step into their flight zone to start movement and stop or retreat a step when they give the slightest evidence of moving away. This is how they learn calm, controlled movement and is the necessary first step in gaining control of any group of cattle.

When working with older or wilder cattle, I might not have enough room to get out of their flight zone from inside the pen. In these situations, to be both safe and effective, I start out by moving them from outside the pen. What I want is for them to take a step or two away from my pressure and then relax. As I do this, their flight zone begins to shrink, which makes it possible for me to work both safely and effectively from inside the pen.

Once the cattle start to move off my pressure, I continue to drive them until they are moving in a smooth and consistent way. Then I might pressure them to move from one pen to another or down a fence line.

After I am satisfied with this movement, I up the pressure on them by working in a narrow alleyway. Here I send them to one end and pressure them to pass by me in the opposite direction. I repeat this exercise until they can pass by me at a walk without fear of being blocked or chased.

These driving techniques should be adequate to produce cattle that are safe to be around in relatively confined quarters. However, if you are a cow-calf producer and want to train your cattle for maximum handling ease throughout a lifetime of feeding, calving and doctoring, you should consider moving further into low-stress handling by learning to “draw” your cattle.

Taking safety a step further: Drawing cattle

Once cattle are relaxed and looking to me for direction, I start teaching them to draw to me. I begin by positioning myself in the center of a round pen. From here I pressure them into motion from their sides. If I don't have access to a round pen, I simply put gates or panels in the corners of a square pen. This keeps them from stacking up in the corners as I drive them around me.

When I have the cattle moving smoothly, I step back and then over in front of them. This causes them to stop in a position where they are facing me. I now begin a slow advance and retreat towards them until one of them lets me stand a few feet in front of her. Here I stop and wait, with an outstretched arm, for her to investigate my hand.

If she decides to move away, I don't try to stop her. Instead, I push her on around the pen. In effect, I say to her, “If that's your choice, go ahead, but you will soon find out that it is more pleasant to stand here with me and be petted than it is to run around and around in the pen.”

When I finally make contact with one of them, a few of the other animals usually join in. This lets me know that I am well on my way to developing a trusting relationship with the group.

I can now use this newly gained confidence on their part to “desensitize” them to specific stressful situations that they will have to deal with throughout their ranch life.

To desensitize cattle to chute

work, they should first be walked through, and then stopped and released when they are standing quietly. This is important because cattle form strong and lasting first impressions. The memory of initial experiences, good or bad, will be carried with them and influence all similar situations in the future.

For cattle, the first contact with any potential stressful situation needs to be one of calm exploration. Once a favorable impression has been formed, cattle will associate any later unpleasantness with some incidental aspect of the situation and not with the chute itself.

They may associate the pain or discomfort with the angle of the sun, or the vet's hat or the strange pick-up that was parked in front that day, but not primarily with the chute itself. They have already decided that the chute is not a threat.

If we can reduce the stress on cattle that is produced by merely being in a work chute, we have gone a long way to prevent them from injuring themselves, the facilities or us.

I have often been disappointed to come across many high-quality cattle that have been turned into dangerous animals through lack of preparation for this and other stressful situations.

Conclusion

Low-stress handling is a labor-saving low-tech method of working cattle that reduces stress and helps increase herd productivity. It minimizes the risk of accidents to all involved in ranch work. It allows ranchers to use less elaborate facilities and still remain safe and effective. However, it does require an initial investment of time and effort to learn how to apply its principles.

Essentially low-stress handling requires that handlers reach out to cattle with a sympathetic understanding of how all situations appear from the perspective of the cattle. It asks the

handler to use his body position, his energy and overall attitude to become the leader of the herd.

It asks that he abandon the use of force and coercion and that he have the patience and determination to allow cattle to make wrong choices before they find the choice that he wants.

For seven years I have managed a herd of 40 Brahman and crossbred cattle, on foot, without injury to myself, with minimal stress on the cattle and with only minimal wear and tear on my facilities.

I owe the safety of my operation to a style of handling I have developed from years of working with natural horsemanship supplemented by helpful insights from the stockmanship of Bud Williams and Temple Grandin.

We know that over time cattle come to reflect the way they are handled. We can create dangerously resentful cattle or cattle that are calm and respectful. With low-stress handling techniques we have a powerful tool to help make ranching a safer, more efficient and more rewarding venture.

For more information on low-stress handling

There are many ways to learn more about low-stress handling. Explore the Internet under “stockmanship” and “low-stress cattle handling” and “herdsmanship.” Visit the Web sites of Bud Williams and Temple Grandin. They have provided the major impetus for low-stress stockmanship today.

Check on the schedules of low stress handlers Guy Glosson and Joel Ham. Read Burt Smith’s Book, *Move ’em: A guide to low stress handling*.

Look into the meetings of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association for presentations on low-stress handling and find out about the Texas A&M Beef Cattle Short Course held every August in College Station. ■