

Cattle Handling Pointers

by R. Gill, C. Pate and R. Machen

Safe and effective cattle handling has always been important. In the last few years there has been a move toward what has been called low-stress handling or as we prefer to call it a return to sound effective stockmanship. Recent events in the livestock industry, have served to heighten awareness of the importance of handling animals appropriately. The animal industries cannot afford to continue to allow any form of abusive behavior or handling of livestock. The culture of handling on any operation stems from the upper management on down to the workers on the ground.

Most cattle handlers, and it does not matter if you are a "cowboy, buckaroo, cow hand, cow man, farm hand or stockman", have learned by watching someone else work stock. Everyone thinks they know how to "work cattle" because they have always been able to get the job done. The moment you admit you do not know everything is the moment you can start to get better.

If you have ever had a thought similar to this one "that stupid ole cow" you have room to improve your abilities as a stockman. A cow is not stupid and will do what they are asked to do. If ask incorrectly they will not do what you want them to do and certainly not when you want them to. Unless, you have the facilities, equipment or manpower to force them to do what you expected. This just results in cattle that continue to get more difficult to handle over time.

In a very simple explanation of stress... *If you decide to do something it is not stressful, if you are forced to do something it will be stressful.* Sound stockmanship will provide the skills to allow one to get an animal to decide to do what you want them to do. Force does not come into play and stress is reduced.

With that said stress cannot be completely removed from life or livestock. It is also the job of a stockman to teach an animal to accept and tolerate pressure and stress for short periods of time. Effective stockmanship skills are based on pressure and release. An animal will quickly learn to accept pressure and not develop stress if they perceive a way for pressure to be released. They move in the desired direction and take the pressure off of themselves or the pressure is released if there is no way they can release it themselves.

The role of a stockman is to create movement in cattle and then use position to control and manage that movement to the desired result. When cattle loose movement they become reluctant to work for you. When movement is lost excessive pressure and driving aids are more likely to be used to force movement. Creating and managing movement is the key to effective stockmanship.

There are five basic principles of cattle behavior that when used properly can improve the ease and speed of working cattle while reducing stress and increasing efficiency. Those principles are:

1. Cattle want to see you.

Understanding how cattle see is basic to getting cattle to respond to your position. Cattle can see everywhere but directly behind them or a small blind spot in front of them. Movement toward the blind spot behind them causes an animal to turn their head to keep you in their line of sight. This can be used to your advantage to change direction of cattle or to your detriment if you are trying to drive cattle straight. When working from behind, it is important to keep moving side to side to prevent cattle from turning in an effort to keep you in their line of sight.

2. Cattle want to go around you.

This allows you to position yourself such that, when they do go around you, they are pointed directly at the gate or destination you had in mind. They'll think it was their idea to go there!

3. Cattle want to be with and will go to other cattle.

A herding instinct is natural among 'prey' animals. There is safety in numbers and they know it. As stockmen we can take advantage of this natural instinct as we work from the front of cattle. If you start the front the back will follow. This behavior is also why you should try to never leave one animal alone in a pen.

4. Cattle want to return to where they have been.

The natural instinct of a cow is to return to the last safe or comfortable place they were. Coupling this behavior principle with the previous three allow us to set cattle up to work for us. The simple principle of the return box or "Bud Box" helps capture and use this principle. It also works great in sorting and moving cattle from one corral to another.

5. Cattle can only process one main thought at a time.

If cattle are thinking about anything other than what you are asking them to do you will need to change their mind first before putting pressure on them. Fear is the biggest distraction, any perception that the handler is a "predator" must be avoided.

Keeping these three principles in mind, following is a list of ten handling pointers to keep in mind and a few suggestions that will improve the ease of handling cattle, whether they are being gathered from the pasture or processed through the corrals.

1. "The only way to work cattle quickly is slowly."

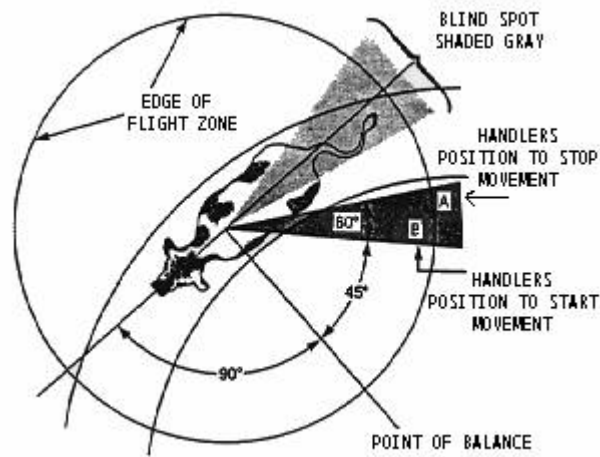
(from a humorous book entitled *Don't Squat With Your Spurs On.*) Patience is a great virtue when gathering and working cattle. When we get in a hurry, inevitably we put excessive or incorrect pressure on cattle, which usually results in an unintended reaction from the cattle. Then we get to ride (or walk) to the back and start over...

2. Work from the front to draw cattle to you.

This goes back to the basic principle #1. Cattle can be easily controlled from the front if they are not afraid of a human. (If they are afraid you are a long way away from being able to handle cattle using low stress principles). Working from the front helps keep cattle from wanting to turning in an effort to keep you in their line of sight. By moving in and out of the flight zone and point of balance, cattle can be easily drawn forward and past you to get them to go where you need them to go.

Most people have seen this diagram outlining the flight zone and point of balance on a cow. However, it is important to remember that these are all just in theory and each individual animal will react differently to body position within these zones. The manner in which you approach or enter these zones or points of balance will impact how the animal responds.

The most important point to remember about the flight zone is not the flight zone, it is the area before the flight zone where a stockman must get skilled at managing. When approaching an animal it is important to be able to predict the response to your entering the flight zone. If the desired movement is not going to occur you need to back out reposition and approach at a different angle.



Where each animal's point of balance falls varies greatly and is influenced by pressure from front or behind, draw of cattle ahead or behind them and whether or not they are comfortable going by the handler. Suffice it to say that the point of balance on any given animal is not where it is drawn on this diagram. The point of balance is actually related to the position you are in relative to the eye.

Forget the angles and circles drawn above. It is the responsibility of each and every person handling cattle to be able to read and determine where these points are on each animal or herd you approach. About the only thing that is correct is the representation of the blind spot in the diagram. It is extremely difficult to stay in an animal's blind spot. They will turn their head slightly to keep you in their line of sight. You can use this to your advantage to draw cattle to one eye or the other when working from behind.

3. Apply pressure when cattle have a place to go.

Low stress livestock handling is not about handling cattle with no pressure. In fact the success of handling cattle correctly depends on knowing when and where to apply pressure and how much pressure to apply. The other key component to effective stockmanship is setting the cattle up to go where you want them to go before you apply pressure. Just as important is to release the pressure as soon as the desired result is achieved.

4. Pressure from the side.

This relates back to working from the front and down the side of an animal and not working from directly behind. The side of an animal is anything from the tip of the nose to the pin bones. Different animals respond differently to pressure and a good stockman must develop the ability to read livestock and anticipate the animal's response before applying pressure.

5. Cattle must be comfortable to go by you and stay straight.

If cattle are not comfortable going by you, they will not work for you very well. Working from the front requires you to get the cattle able to pass you without balking or spooking. This simple principle facilitates penning, sorting and processing cattle.

The further forward you can make an animal's point of balance the easier it is to work and sort cattle. That is why using the draw of other cattle makes it easier to work and sort cattle in an alley or from one corral to another.

If an animal is abruptly stopped when it tries to pass the handler they will be increasingly reluctant to try and come by. That is why it is important to not stop forward motion abruptly but rather allow the animal time and room to turn back until it is time for you to release the pressure by stepping out and toward them and asking them to go by, simply by changing your body position.

This simple procedure of properly stopping and turning cattle away or back will make the difference in how cattle work throughout the day and their life. If the handler has to move past the point of balance as it is shown in the previous diagram to get an animal out of group then it can put them out of position to control movement of the cattle behind them further aggravating the problem.

The key is to position yourself such that, when cattle go where they want to go, it is exactly where you intended for them to be.

6. Pressure cattle from behind only when absolutely necessary.

Like any 'prey' animal, cattle cannot see directly behind themselves. If you assume a position directly behind cattle (in their blind spot), they will turn to one side or the other in order to see you. To 'drive' cattle in a straight line, assume a position behind their point of balance (shoulder) and off to either side.

7. When working cattle, move in triangles.

Sounds odd, but it works. Move in straight lines. For example, if you work in an arch pattern behind the cattle, you will find them being drawn from side to side (and consequently walking in a zig-zag pattern) as they follow your movement. Move into their flight zone to create or correct movement. Retreat from their flight zone to slow or stop movement.

8. Going with the flow of cattle slows them down or stops their movement.

It's all about that point of balance – as you move in the same direction the cattle are traveling, when you approach a position parallel to their point of balance, they will slow down, and as you pass the point of balance they will stop and/or reverse their direction.

This is an important concept in settling high stress cattle. The important part in this process is to get the cattle to stop without reversing their direction. Teach them to stop straight and stay in the position they were headed.

9. Going against the flow of cattle initiates or accelerates their movement.

The inverse or opposite of pointer # 8. Ever filled the chute, then pressured the last animal in line to move the others forward? It's likely he or she had no place to go and nothing happened. Next time, try leaving their flight zone, walk up ahead of the line, then re-enter the flight zone of the first in line and walk alongside the chute, front to back, and see what happens. We suspect that as you pass their point of balance, they will step forward. The one in the front will 'pull' the others forward.

10. Cattle work best when *they* are ready - You have to get them there.

Cattle are not mind readers. You have to teach, condition and prepare them. Unfortunately, today's cattle owners are short on time and experienced labor, and consequently, don't spend time with their cattle as did the stockmen of days gone by. Perhaps there's not time to educate the entire existing herd, but quality time spent with replacement heifers will pay dividends for years to come. Spend time with heifers (in both the pasture and the pens) when you *want* to, not just when you *have* to.

The days of rough cattle handling need to pass – quickly. Numerous others will handle your cattle after they have left your care. Bad habits and unruly behavior in cattle and humans is learned. Make sure your cattle (calves) are started correctly. More importantly make sure your cattle hands are started correctly. First impressions are critical – as Will Rogers once said “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.”

Safety and wholesomeness of the food supply have long been important. Our preservation techniques have progressed from smoking, drying and salting, to canning, to refrigeration and freezing, to vacuum packaging and most recently to irradiation. The North American food supply is the safest and most wholesome on the planet.

Beef consumers remain interested in safety and wholesomeness, but are more concerned than ever before about where and how their food is produced. When working correctly, shouting, whistling, poking and prodding cattle is unnecessary. In fact, it is counterproductive and distracts cattle from what you really want them to do.

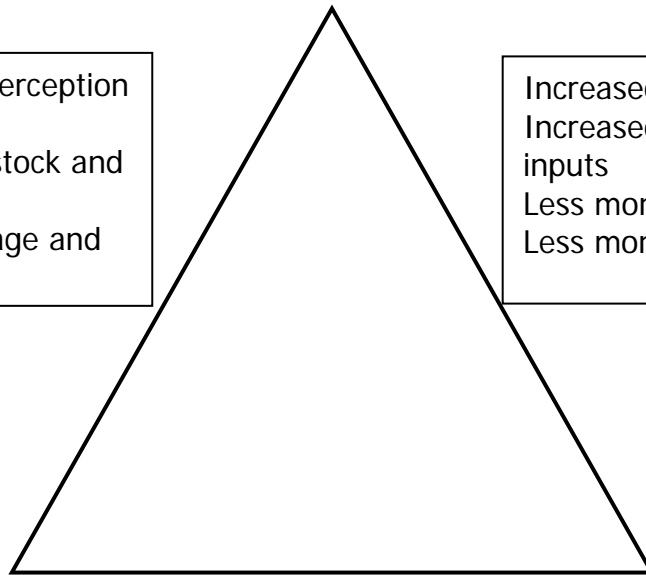
WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT To YOU and the BEEF CATTLE INDUSTRY

Welfare

Improved public perception of cattle handling
Less injury to livestock and handlers
Less carcass damage and trim loss

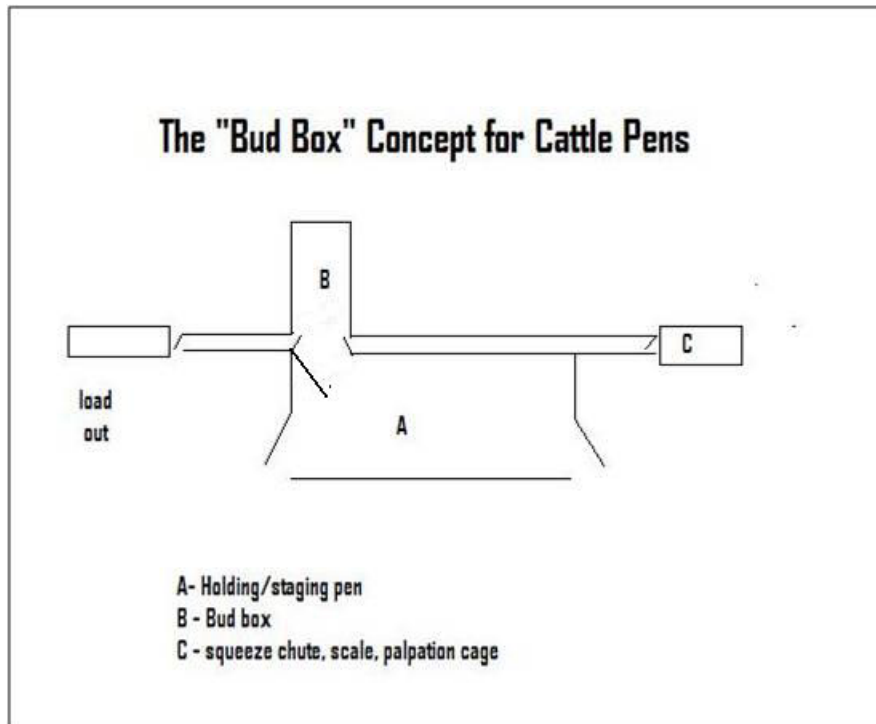
Performance

Increased efficiency
Increased gain without additional inputs
Less money on medicine/treatments
Less money for facilities



Quality of Life

Profitability
Sustaining family operations
Enjoyment of ranching lifestyle



There is nothing magical about a "Bud Box" or Return Box. The simplicity of the box is that it makes you, as a stockman, do things correctly. If you do not, cattle will not work any better out of a box than they will a tub. When handled correctly, however, they will work better out of a box than they will a tub system. If a box does not work **you** are doing something wrong!

The reason the box works is that it takes advantage of all five basic principles of behavior. As cattle enter the box they come to the back of the box and transition to go back to where they came from (5), they can then easily see you (1), they can move around you (2), the draw of the leaders pull the rest of the cattle into the crowd alley (3) and this all occurs without force so they are free to think about what you are wanting them to do (4) without being distracted. It is that simple.

We encourage you to improve your skills as a stockman. For more information and additional training opportunities go to <http://www.effectivestockmanship.com>

Contact information:

Ron Gill, Ph.D., Prof. and Livestock Specialist, Texas AgriLife Extension Service. Stephenville, Texas,
 Texas A&M System: Email: RGill@ag.tamu.edu Website: <http://beef.tamu.edu>.

Rick Machen, Ph.D. Prof. and Livestock Specialist, Texas AgriLife Extension Service. Uvalde, Texas,
 Texas A&M System: Email: RMachen@ag.tamu.edu Website: <http://beef.tamu.edu>.

Curt Pate, Rancher, Stockman and Horseman from South Dakota. American Quarter Horse Association,
 Spokesman and Regional Experience Clinician.

Email: curtpate@sdplains.com Website: <http://www.effectivestockmanship.com>