

# Prepare Calves for Low-stress Weaning

Tom Noffsinger shows how calves can keep gaining on weaning day by using low-stress preparation.

by Kasey Brown, associate editor

**W**hen you wean your calves, do you expect them to gain as much on weaning day as they did the day before? Tom Noffsinger, veterinarian and low-stress animal-handling expert, said you should if you handle them correctly.

Stockmanship is the foundation of animal health, performance and profit potential, he told attendees of the Merck-sponsored Angus University workshops during the Angus Means Business National Convention & Trade Show in Overland Park, Kan.

Stockmanship means being a caregiver, not a caretaker. Caregivers should be dedicated to making every human-cattle

interaction a positive experience for both parties. Education means developing understanding between you and the cattle, and creates more confidence to recognize abnormalities and develop interventions earlier, Noffsinger explained.

“Low-stress handling is common sense, and it is a low-cost, high-yield management tool,” Noffsinger added. It allows cattlemen

to detect disease sooner, reduce cases of lameness, improve product quality and food safety, reduce staff turnover, save money on facility design, improve feed-intake levels, and increase safety.

He cited stockmanship expert Bud

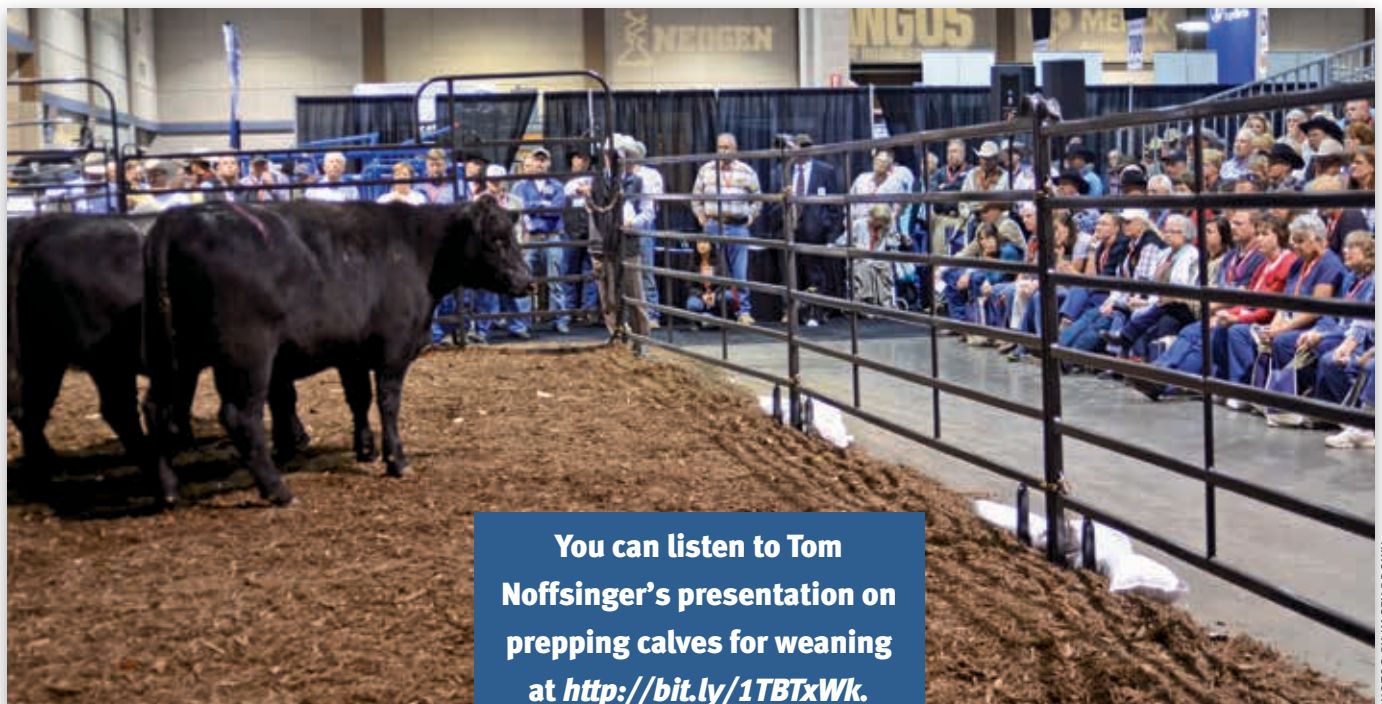
Williams, “Never put yourself in a position to fail. Safety is important.”

Safety is important for both cattlemen and cattle. Without trust between the stockman and the cattle, cattle will not show weaknesses because they will perceive the cattleman as a threat, or a predator, Noffsinger explained. “If animals don’t trust you, they won’t be honest about how they feel.”

Variation in health and performance is largely due to human impact, he added.

Noffsinger suggested weaning success starts with an extension of care for the cow-calf pair. It requires forward-planning for success. Train pairs to travel together with low-stress gathering.

Train calves for separation at processing/vaccination time. He shared an example of sorting calves into a pen at the beginning of the chute facility, and the cows at the end of



You can listen to Tom Noffsinger’s presentation on prepping calves for weaning at <http://bit.ly/1BTxWk>.

PHOTOS BY KASEY BROWN



it. Let the calves go through the facility once to get back to their mamas without being handled. This lets them experience the chute without developing a fear of it.

Noffsinger recommends vaccinating in a similar way after this. Keep them apart overnight, but let the calves return to their mamas after vaccination. This will train them to be separated. When weaning time comes, the calves won't experience something completely new and will continue gaining weight. Without being stressed at weaning, calves' immune systems function at a higher level, too.

For an example of low-stress sorting, read the article by Heather Smith Thomas in the May 2015 *Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA* (available at <http://bit.ly/1O2Hsb6>).

He illustrated the "luxuries of biology," which progresses from life to growth, reproduction, immune function and product quality. If a calf is stressed, the biological progression doesn't happen.

Preconditioning calves sets them up for success in the feedyard, Noffsinger emphasized, comparing not vaccinating calves before sending them to the feedlot to giving a kindergartener their shots two weeks after school has started; it's too late.

"Acclimation is the key to success," he concluded.

Noffsinger presented two workshops during Angus University's educational block focused on cattle handling. The educational series was sponsored by Merck Animal Health. To listen to his presentations, visit the convention Newsroom at <http://angusjournal.com/NCnTS/2015/index.html>.



**Editor's Note:** This article is part of the online coverage of the Angus Means Business National Convention & Trade Show provided by Angus Media. Visit the convention Newsroom available at <http://angusjournal.com/NCnTS/2015/index.html> to access additional summaries, PowerPoint presentations and the audio of the sessions.

## Stockmanship Tips

People are the key in stockmanship, not steel and concrete, said Tom Noffsinger. The veterinarian and animal-handling expert gave stockmanship tips to attendees of the Merck-sponsored Angus University workshops at the Angus Means Business National Convention & Trade Show in Overland Park, Kan., this past November. He demonstrated his tips with live cattle in the animal-handling area of the trade show.



PHOTO BY LEANN SCHLEICHER, ANGUS MEDIA

► Tom Noffsinger says an easy way to tell if a calf is comfortable is if it ducks its head and licks its lips.

A relationship of respect and courtesy is the cornerstone of good stockmanship. Cattle want to please and crave guidance. Stockmen give this guidance by calmly applying pressure and then saying "thank you" by releasing that pressure when the objective has been met, he explained.

Cattle want to see the source of the pressure — the stockman — and the destination. Noffsinger is not a fan of solid walls because this limits their vision and stresses them. He explained that cattle have horizontal pupils. When their heads are down while grazing, cows have 360° peripheral vision. When a cow raises her head, the peripheral vision decreases to 270°. He warned against being on catwalks when cattle enter the feedlot because that makes them raise their heads.

Additionally, Noffsinger said that cattle do not have much depth perception, so standing still doesn't help get cattle to where you want them. Slightly rocking from foot to foot creates motion and lets cattle see you more easily.

To work cattle, he suggested working from the front. When a calf's head turns toward you, move forward to gain its attention and straighten its head, then work back toward its shoulder to encourage forward movement, Noffsinger advised. Move from front to back to increase motion, and parallel movement to stop motion.

Cattle will go around you if they can see their destination, and this behavior makes a "Bud Box" work well. (For more information on Bud Boxes, check out the *Angus Journal* article "In Search of the Perfect Working Facility.") When possible, Noffsinger recommends working a Bud Box on the left side of the animal.

The optic nerves in a bovine animal cross the brain, so what the animal sees from its right eye goes to the left side of the brain, and what it sees from its left eye goes to the right side of the brain. Like humans, cattle process things more calmly in the right side of the brain. Working cattle on their left side will help them remain calm.

When training and acclimating cattle, Noffsinger urged cattlemen to not be a nuisance and to give short lessons. This applies to training cattle to lead. His grandchildren, he shared, get their show calves to stop, start and walk with them before they even come close to the calves with a halter. This lets the cattle build a relationship with them before being stressed with a halter. An easy way to tell if a calf is comfortable is if it ducks its head and licks its lips.

For more information on stockmanship and low-stress animal-handling methods, Noffsinger created 10 training modules with Merck Animal Health. The modules can be accessed at [www.creatingconnections.info](http://www.creatingconnections.info).

You can listen to Tom Noffsinger's presentation on stockmanship at <http://bit.ly/1VEHYii>.