

Holding the Halter

Working gradually with your animal may lead to better results.

by Brooke Byrd



Before juniors can head into the showing, they need a good partner with which to work. Halter-breaking a calf is one of the steps to entering the ring and catching the judge's attention. However, it's something that takes time and patience.

"Halter-breaking is not something that can be done overnight or in a week," says Melvin Porter, Meldon Farms, Jefferson, Ga. "It's a gradual process."

Starting from scratch

Porter, a past advisor for the Georgia Junior Angus Association with 30 years of experience working with juniors and gentling calves, says the process begins earlier than many might think. "Minimize as much stress as you can on the calves," he says, beginning the first time they ever see humans. "Don't do anything that's going to cause the calf to relate or associate pain or discomfort to you."

Calm handling practices are the best ways to prevent wild calves, Porter says. "Cattle associate

different things — whether being mishandled with dogs or horses or four-wheelers — with being afraid and hurting." Many problems juniors may have when halter-breaking can be linked to the way animals were worked early in their lives. "I see a lot of kicking in cattle that have been worked by dogs," he explains.

When working calves, Porter says, producers and juniors should avoid combining weaning stress with stressful management practices to prevent the calf from associating negative things with people.

If giving shots, branding and weaning at the same time, "the calf is going to remember that," he says. "But if you turn it back out with its mother and leave it alone

for 10 days to two weeks, it's all forgotten."

Porter also suggests producers not combine weaning and halter-breaking. "If you take a calf away from its mother, put it in the barn and start halter-breaking it, the calf's going to see you as the bad guy," he notes.

Shopping around

When juniors are looking to buy show animals, quality is the most important feature. But, an animal's behavior can indicate if halter-breaking will be an easy task.

"The calves you want to stay away from are the calves that stay away from you," Porter emphasizes. If calves immediately try to get as far away as possible or watch intently and nervously with their heads high, they may be bad choices, Porter says. "It helps to know the farm, the people that own the farm and how they handle the cattle. If they repeatedly use hot sticks or dogs when working cattle, normally those cattle are a lot tougher to break."

Porter also suggests halter-breaking animals sooner rather than later. He prefers to start when calves are 5 months old, noting, "the younger they are, the easier it is."

A gradual process

Brian Stoller, Bear Mountain Angus Ranch, Melba, Idaho, emphasizes the importance of being patient and calm when halter-breaking cattle. "You can't be scared around them, because they'll sense that," he says.

Especially crucial, he notes, is to never take frustration or anger out on an animal. "If you have to, just let them go, walk away and start over a couple hours later," he says.

Stoller, who halter-breaks 50-60 head a year, selling mainly to juniors, begins by putting animals in a small pen, approximately 10 feet (ft.) × 10 ft. or 12 ft. × 12 ft. "Make sure there's not a lot of other stuff going on that will freak them out," he says. In addition, he suggests working with multiple

Items you'll need

When halter-breaking animals, the following items are important.

- ▶ Rope halter
- ▶ Small pen
- ▶ Showstick
- ▶ Scotch comb
- ▶ Rice root brush
- ▶ Scrub brush
- ▶ Hose
- ▶ Blower



animals at one time, as they may feel more comfortable in groups.

Stoller keeps animals in the pen for about a week without approaching them directly. "Be around them every day, just feeding and watering them," he says. "Let them get used to you; let them know you're not going to hurt them."

Once calves calm down, Stoller spends time with each animal, scratching it with a showstick. "Once you start scratching them," he notes, "they usually learn to like it." After spending 20 or 30 minutes just scratching an animal, Stoller suggests using a scotch comb or brush to get the animal accustomed to being touched.

After calves are calm enough to stand still when being scratched and combed (usually after about two or three days), Stoller recommends putting the halter on. He brings the halter along the back of the animal toward its head, while scratching it. "Flip it over the offside ear, then the other ear, then pull the lead rope tight to get it under the chin," he says. If necessary, a showstick can be used to maneuver the halter around the animal's head.

If the animal will not stand still long enough to put the halter on, Stoller notes that the same process can be done with the animal captured in a chute.

Learning the ropes

After two or three days of letting the animal get used to a halter, Stoller likes to wrap the end of the halter around a panel, so the animal gets used to having its head up. While holding the end, he'll stand with the

Basic grooming

Part of the halter-breaking process includes getting the animal used to everything that will have to be done to it at a show, says Cody Sankey, manager of Michigan State University's purebred beef cattle unit. The animal must learn to tolerate brushing, combing, rinsing and blowing, but Sankey says such practices are also vital for keeping the animal's hair in good shape.

"Try to rinse your calf every day," he says. Leading the animal to the washrack will also help juniors work on skills necessary for the showing.

When rinsing, Sankey suggests always keeping where the animal can see what you're doing. "That way, when you get closer to them, you don't catch them off guard," he says. He begins while standing at the animal's shoulder, a short distance away. "Ease the water up on them," he explains, "and gradually get them soaked down." At least for the first two or three times, Sankey advises avoiding the animal's head.

After the animal is thoroughly wet, he says, "ease in there and totally scrub its whole body," using a scrub brush. If using soap, make sure to completely rinse it out to avoid causing dandruff and drying out hair.

When finished rinsing, Sankey suggests using a blower to dry the animal, also easing it onto the calf. "Start out from a distance and work yourself closer," he says. "Start over its ribs, because that usually doesn't bother it as much as around the legs or belly."

Combing and brushing are also important ways to work the hair and make it healthier. When blowing, rinsing or just combing an animal to get it used to people, Sankey says to always comb forward, and, if an animal has more hair, upward. "You need to keep it in good shape so it's easy to work with," he explains.



animal and continue to scratch, comb and otherwise get it used to being around people. "It gets used to being pulled on," he explains, "but not to where it's going to flop over and hurt itself."

"Get it used to everything that might happen to it at a show," he says.

Cody Sankey, manager of Michigan State University's purebred beef cattle unit, expects to halter-break approximately 100 head this year alone. He, like Stoller, spends time working with animals to calm them down and get them used to people before tying them up. He emphasizes the importance of not leaving animals unattended while they

are tied, especially at first. "They can injure themselves if you leave them unattended," he says, "especially cattle that aren't used to a halter."

Sankey prefers to tie animals low the first few times, until they get used to the feel of the halter and stop pulling back. "The first few days, I'll let them stand there for an hour or so, and then we may stop and that may be all we do for the day," he notes. While the animal is tied, Sankey stands and gets it accustomed to being touched with the showstick, scotch comb and brush.

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► Brian Stoller, Melba, Idaho, notes the importance of using a slipknot when tying cattle. "If there are any problems, you can release them if you have to," he says.

PHOTOS BY CORINNE PATTERSON

Leading the way

After two or three days of tying animals and working with them, Sankey is ready to start leading. At first, he recommends leading animals to feed and water, giving them the chance to associate being led and tied up with a reward. He also suggests having a second person to prompt the animal forward.

“Take your time and give them a little slack on the halter,” Sankey notes. “Don’t just

put your hand right up next to their head and try to drag them everywhere.”

If trying to lead an animal alone and it refuses to budge, Sankey suggests letting the animal stand for a few moments. “If you just let up a little bit, then pull gently on it again, it will usually walk with you,” he says. “It can be hard when you’re by yourself, but with a lot of patience you can succeed.”

He warns against hooking animals to tractors or other vehicles. “You’re always

going to have them fighting the halter any time you try to lead them,” he says. To gain more control, people can work with a show halter with a chain under the chin instead of the traditional rope halter, or hold a showstick in front of the animal’s nose to slow it down. Controlling the animal’s head, Sankey says, is the key to controlling its whole body.

“Some are just harder to work with than others, and I try not to give up,” he says.

However, he notes that people have to judge for themselves if an animal is too difficult to work with, especially for younger juniors.

“If you’ve worked with them for at least two weeks and they’re mean and try to take you, or frantically try to run off,” he says, “you may not want to mess with them.”

Keeping it up

After the animal has been worked with for two or three weeks and has basic training

with being haltered, combed, touched, tied and led, Sankey suggests rinsing and blowing every day (see “Basic grooming” on page 107) and practicing showing and leading, including setting up feet. Working with animals every day, even for only a few hours, is important to having a good partner in the showing.

“Repetition is the most important thing,” he advises. “Do it over and over again.”

And, while everyone may find things that

work and don’t work specifically for them, Porter emphasizes the need for rewarding good behavior and staying calm and patient. “If the calf doesn’t trust you, then you can’t trust it,” he says. “If you’re mean to it, you can forget it.

“The process may take longer,” he says, “but in the end you’ve got a calf you won’t have a problem with.”

