

There's No Place Like Home

Story & photos by **Troy Smith**

Why is it that, despite the availability of more and better products for preventing and treating disease, cattle producers continue to struggle with animal health issues? This seems to be particularly evident in the feedlot industry. Despite comprehensive vaccination programs and treatment therapies, feedlot morbidity and mortality rates haven't declined. Why is that?

Could it be psychological? According to veterinarians Tom Noffsinger and Lynn Locatelli, a critter's emotional state can predispose a tendency toward sickness. Large animal practitioners and feedlot consultants based in Benkelman, Neb., share an appreciation for the animal's psychological condition.

Emotion can significantly affect its health status and that of its penmates.

Noffsinger says attitudes are changing, among colleagues and feedlot personnel, toward recognition of the link between psychological and physical well-being. He and Locatelli consider it a realistic attitude toward animal welfare. It's not the same as the attitude displayed by animal rights activists who don't really understand animals and their needs, he explains. Those people mistakenly assign human attributes and feelings to animals.

Noffsinger says animals, including feedlot cattle, need a place that feels like home. While animals do not have the same rights as humans, he believes they deserve a home offering what he terms the "five freedoms."

According to Noffsinger, a good home provides:

- ▶ freedom from hunger and thirst;
- ▶ freedom from environmental challenge;
- ▶ freedom from disease and injury;
- ▶ freedom from restriction of normal behavior and interaction; and
- ▶ freedom from fear and distress.

Freedom from environmental challenge doesn't necessarily mean cattle need a roof

over their heads, Noffsinger explains. But their environment can be managed to

mitigate deep snow, mud or excessive dust. A place that feels like home to cattle is a safe place with plenty to eat and drink, and enough room to run and buck a little.

"Expression of exuberance is a good thing," Noffsinger grins. "It's a sign of good cattle health, and it promotes good health."

Stress effects and handling

According to Noffsinger, low-stress cattle handling techniques are an integral part of a management strategy

focused on optimal animal health and performance. It's difficult to completely eliminate all of the stress that occurs when cattle are handled, but it should always be the goal. Stress, whether manifested as apprehension, anxiety or panic, always comes at a cost.

The negative effects of stress can lead to injury among animals or handlers. More often, the cost is exacted by more insidious means — lowered feed intake and reduced performance. Stress also induces high levels of cortisol in the animal's bloodstream, which may render vaccinations ineffective. Stress undermines an animal's immune status, making it more susceptible to viral infection. It is then more vulnerable to secondary bacterial infection. There is a synergy created, Noffsinger says, that

starts as a result of the animal's emotional discomfort.

"Stress can create non-eaters or non-drinkers among newly arrived cattle," Noffsinger adds. "They're in strange surroundings and confused. Maybe they're not acclimated to a bunk situation. The feed is unfamiliar. They won't compete with more dominant penmates. They're not sick — not yet. They're suffering from discontent, but it's often misdiagnosed as sickness. The last thing that kind of animal needs is a big dose of antibiotic."

However, according to Locatelli, there are multiple opportunities to influence the way cattle behave when they are handled. These opportunities occur whenever cattle are moved, sorted, processed or handled for any reason. But cattle learn the wrong lesson when their handlers have the wrong attitude.

"Cattle are very attitude-sensitive. They respond to changes in personnel and differences in handling methods," Locatelli says. "All human contact shapes cattle behavior, for better or for worse, whether it's intentional or not."

Body language is what speaks to

cattle. Yet some folk who were raised on livestock operations and have worked with cattle for years do not grasp this kind of communication. Whether in a pasture or feedlot setting, and whether handling a single animal, a cow-calf pair or a large group, Locatelli says that cattle respond better when handlers avoid actions cattle perceive as predatory. Handlers will enjoy greater success when quietly working cattle from the side of the animal or herd, rather than behind it. They should move in straight lines rather than circling animals in predator fashion.

But the key is to apply gentle pressure to the animal's flight zone (personal space), and release the pressure when the desired movement is achieved. Use pressure and



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release, alternately, to maintain movement and guide animal direction.

It takes time, but Locatelli says everybody should have time to do things right. And the time to start training cattle is at the earliest opportunity. She and Noffsinger favor schooling at the cow-calf level first. Frequently riding or walking among cows and their new calves will encourage them to “pair up,” strengthening the cow-calf bond. It also helps calves learn to move in response to pressure.

In a feedlot situation, Locatelli and Noffsinger urge handlers to acclimate newly arrived cattle. Taking time to settle nervous, bawling cattle starts with controlling their tendency toward constant motion. They recommend spending time in the pen, giving particular attention to “initiator” or “sentinel” animals that show the greatest anxiety. Controlling their excessive movement will control motion within the whole group. Noffsinger calls the first four days after arrival critical to dissipating distress and establishing the animals’

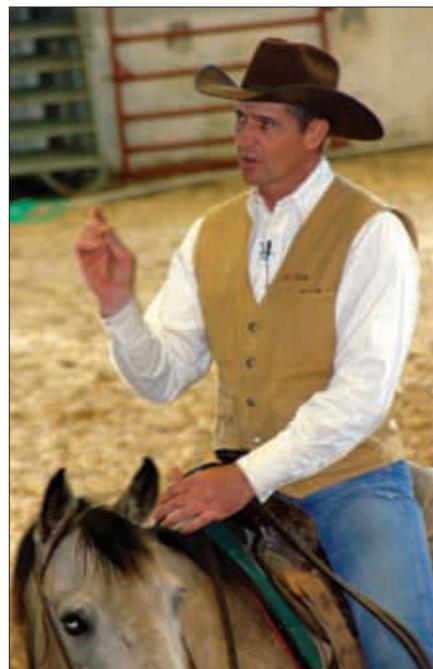
Safeguarding Animal Health

comfort level in their new home. At the same time, cattle learn to respond more readily to low-stress handling techniques.

“It’s about building trust and developing communication. Like any prey animal, cattle often conceal weaknesses like lameness or other health issues. They have to trust their handlers before they let it show,” Noffsinger states.

Because of the effect psychological well-being has on cattle health and performance, Noffsinger doubts technology can effectively replace competent feedlot pen riders. But the job description probably should be expanded. Rather than just detection of illness, their objective should be promotion of wellness, through low-stress handling methods.

“Techniques exist that make economic sense and address animal welfare concerns of consumers,” Noffsinger adds. “In my opinion, by properly addressing animal welfare, animal rights are a non-issue.”



► Curt Pate tutors others with a desire to become better stockmen through low-stress handling methods, demonstrating the techniques discussed by Noffsinger and Locatelli.

Attitude adjustment

Montana’s Curt Pate has punched cows, straddled broncs and started colts to make a living. He has worked as a livestock auctioneer and rodeo announcer. He is probably best known as a horsemanship clinician. Pate worked hard to cultivate his riding and roping abilities and has been called upon to share his expertise, as a Hollywood technical advisor for movie portrayals of the cowboy way.

That image of the stoic cowboy conquering and dominating untamed horses and cattle has long been a lure to youngsters and more than a few old men. Along with the desire for mastering buckaroo skills, Pate admits he too embraced the rough-and-tumble, do-or-die cowboy attitude — an attitude laced with stubborn pride. No more. Pate still considers the skills useful, but not the attitude.

“When I was young I wanted to be the best cowboy I could be. More recently, I’ve dedicated myself to becoming the best stockman

I can be. There is a difference,” Pate explains.

These days, along with tending his own ranch and conducting horsemanship clinics, Pate also tutors others with a desire to become better stockmen, through application of low-stress handling methods. He demonstrated the techniques discussed by veterinarians Tom Noffsinger and Lynn Locatelli during the International Symposium on Beef Cattle Welfare. Held in May, the event was hosted by the Beef Cattle Institute at Kansas State University.

Discounting the notion that cowboys have to ride hard and force cattle into submission, Pate considers low-stress cattle handling to be a smarter way to go. The stockman strives to understand the prey animal instincts cattle possess. The stockman, whether on foot or horseback, uses position, distance, angle of approach and variation in speed to communicate with cattle.

“If you’re working really hard [when handling cattle], you’re probably doing something wrong. Work smarter,” Pate advises.

It means knowing when and where to apply pressure, when to ease the pressure and when to back off and wait. For example, instead of hurraing a herd of cattle from the rear, apply pressure from the side of the herd to draw leaders out front. Focus on getting the leaders to move in the desired direction and let the others follow.

Pate says the biggest obstacle to low-stress handling is a time-starved handler trying to make things happen too fast. By slowing down and striving for better communication, the job at hand will likely take less total time. If not now, less time and effort will be spent in the long run, as subsequent handling will be accomplished more efficiently. The goal is to have cattle work more easily every time they are moved or put through the working pens, because previous experiences involved little or no stress — for the cattle or the handlers.

“Working cattle shouldn’t be something you dread,” Pate admonishes. “Why can’t it be fun? It should be.”



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