

## Helpful Hints for CALVING SEASON

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**M**ost of us strive for a herd of easy-calving cows. But once in awhile you need to help with a birth or correct a malpresentation.

On our ranch we calve in cold weather (January and February), so most of our cows go in the barn to calve in an individual stall. If we have to help with a birth, it's easy to catch up with the cow or restrain her in this small area.

On a heifer, we prefer to do a "sneak job" if possible, rather than upset her by tying her up or putting her into a headcatcher. One of us slips quietly into the stall while she is down straining, and sneaks up behind her to put chains on the calf's legs.

Our heifers are accustomed to us. We walk through them a lot in the maternity pen before they calve. Our presence in the stall doesn't upset them. Even with a timid heifer, if you can get the chains on the calf and start pulling a little, the heifer will usually settle back down and start straining again, since your pulling stimulates her to strain.

If a heifer jumps up, you can usually keep up with her in the small stall and get her to stand and strain, especially

if there is someone else on hand to come in and keep her from circling round and round, and you can get the calf delivered. Often the heifer will go down again once she resumes straining. But don't try this in a big pen.

### Restraining a Cow

On a really flighty cow or heifer that we can't catch up with, or one that might get upset and on the fight, we swing one of the partition panels out into the stall, making a "V," and run her behind it, closing it up tight against her, with a rope behind her hindquarters to keep her from backing up.

This works a lot better than trying to catch her by the head and tie her up (sometimes it can be difficult to untie the cow afterward, if she is on the fight), or even to use a chute or headcatcher. In a calving situation we prefer to have the cow or heifer less tightly confined, in case she goes down. If she lies down we can just swing the panel away, and continue pulling the calf.

It's not difficult to ease even a flighty or timid cow behind a swinging panel. If you have your rope already secured to the stall wall or fence, you can just walk her over it and

quickly pick it up behind her to secure the panel against her as she goes into the "V" and swing the panel tight on her. If your panel is fairly tall (so she can't try to rear up over the top of it) and securely tied or hinged to the wall so her possible lunging cannot break it loose, this is a safe way to temporarily restrain a cow.

The rope behind her— at a level between her hocks and vulva that gives you room to pull the calf— serves to hold the panel against her and keep her from backing out. You can either tie the rope with a quick release knot, or have someone hold it, with several hitches around the panel board or pole, while you check the cow, correct the malpresentation, or deliver the calf.

Once the calf is delivered, swing the panel open again and give the cow her freedom so she can mother the calf, without the fuss and danger of having to untie her head. Because our barn stalls are all divided by swinging panels, we always have an instant "chute" in any stall whenever we might need one. This is less traumatic for a heifer than having to move her to a chute or headcatcher. We can quietly leave her and the calf alone in the stall afterward without bothering her, and she is more apt to mother the calf.

### Assisting a Birth

My husband and I work as a team pulling calves and we pull them all by hand. We never use a mechanical calf puller except on backward calves — to give the additional leverage to get the calf out fast enough before he suffocates. But in other deliveries the strength of two people is usually adequate. You are less apt to injure the cow or calf, and you can pull a calf properly at the correct angle. A calf puller limits your options

and puts the stress at the wrong angle most of the time.

The calf has to come in an arc — up over the cow's pelvis from down deep in the uterus. When his feet protrude from the vulva and you are pulling him, you can pull straight out, but after you get his head and shoulders out you should start pulling downward toward the cow's hocks, so the calf's body can make the arc over the cow's pelvis. In a normal unassisted birth, you've undoubtedly noticed that the calf curves toward the cow's hocks and feet as he slides out. This is what you need to duplicate when pulling a calf, for easiest delivery.

On a difficult birth it helps if one person pulls on the front feet (chains around the leg above the fetlock joints, so you won't hurt the joints or feet) while the other person stretches the cow's vulva. My husband usually pulls on the calf while I stand beside the cow (if she's up) or sit beside her hips (if she's down). I face to the rear, and put my fingers between the calf's head and the vulva, pulling and stretching the vulva each time the cow strains. We pull (and stretch the vulva) each time she strains, then rest as she rests. Stretching the vulva as the head comes through speeds the birth. Once the head is out, the rest of the calf comes easier (or if it's a really big calf and a hard birth, I help my husband finish pulling the calf).

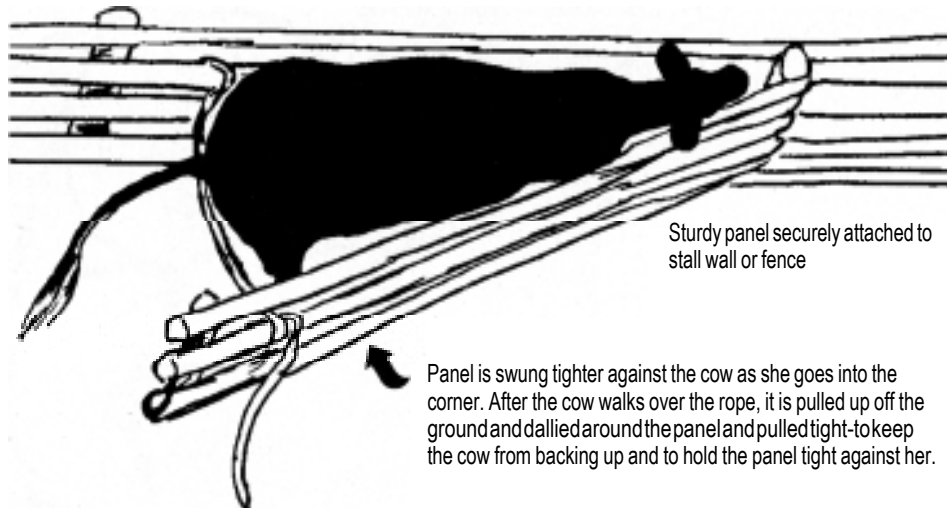
### Hiplock Hang Up

Sometimes on a difficult birth you get the calf part way out, only to have him hang up at the hips. Remember that it has to come up and over the cow's pelvic brim in an arc. Get the calf out far enough that his rib cage is free of the birth canal before you pull sharply downward (or you'll hurt his ribs) and so that if the

## Restraining a cow behind a panel (stall divider)

Rope tied to stall wall or fence

Stall wall or fence



Sturdy panel securely attached to stall wall or fence

Panel is swung tighter against the cow as she goes into the corner. After the cow walks over the rope, it is pulled up off the ground and dallied around the panel and pulled tight to keep the cow from backing up and to hold the panel tight against her.

cord pinches off he can start to breathe even if his hind end is still stuck in the cow.

On a serious hiplock, make sure the rib cage is out, then pull straight downward and underneath the cow (if she is standing), pulling the calf between her hind legs. This raises the calf's hips higher, to where the cow's pelvic opening is widest, and he is more able to come through than if you pull him straight out with his hips caught against her pelvic bones. If the cow is down, pull him between her hind legs

toward her belly. On a really bad hiplock, roll the cow temporarily onto her back and pull the calf directly toward her belly, between her legs. Don't panic. Get the calf breathing. This will buy you time to get him on out.

### **Backward and Breech**

If a calf is coming backward, the birth must usually be assisted in order to have a live calf. Hind feet will be bottoms up. But before you attach chains, feel inside the cow to see if those are actually

hind legs (hocks instead of knees). Sometimes a calf may be rotated a bit (sideways or even upside down) instead of backward.

If the calf is indeed backward, restrain the cow where there is adequate room to maneuver your calf puller. Then attach chains to the calf above his feet and start pulling him out. Once you get the legs out past the hocks, take time to reposition the chains above the hocks, especially if it is a large or long-legged calf. This will give

you more room to winch before you run out of cable.

Now gently winch the calf on out, slowly at first until the rib cage is started through. You don't want to crush his rib cage if it catches on the cow's pelvis. Once the calf is about midway out (navel cord pinching off as it comes through the pelvis), hurry him on out before he suffocates.

With a breech calf—legs forward, rump aimed toward the birth canal—the cow may not start straining. She'll seem to be in early labor a long time. If you wait too long to check her, the placenta may detach and the calf will die. If a cow is taking too long in early labor, restrain her and check inside to see if there is a malpresentation. If the calf is breech, you'll feel a tail or rump. The feet must be brought into the birth canal. This will be easier if the cow is standing up, so you can get both arms into her.

With one hand push the calf's rump forward into the uterus as far as possible. With the other hand grasp a leg, bend the hock joint and lift it upward. Draw the calf's foot backward in an arc, keeping the hock flexed tightly and the calf pushed forward. Lift the foot up over the cow's pelvis with your hand cupped around the hoof so it doesn't tear the uterus. Do the same with the other leg. Once both legs are in the birth canal you can attach chains and pull the calf.

Once the calf is out, get the fluid out of his airways and get him breathing. You may have to bang him upside down briefly to let the fluid drain out his nose. Then stimulate the calf to cough by sticking a clean piece of hay or straw up one nostril. Most backward and breech calves can be saved if you are there to give assistance— so it pays to keep track of those calving cows.