

# Training A Calf To Lead

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

*You've selected the calf you want to show. Your next task is to gentle and halter-break it so it's easy to handle and well-mannered for the showing.*

*The gentling process starts when you begin feeding. Calves will associate you with feed and come to you. They gentle more quickly if you walk into the pen with them when feeding rather than just pouring the grain over the fence into the trough. You want them to come to you, not the feed bucket. The training will be much easier if calves are used to you before you start halter-breaking.*

## ■ Halter-breaking

If starting with a calf that hasn't had close experience with humans, spend time getting it used to being handled. Handle it carefully at first to avoid scaring it. It will learn to trust you more quickly and will be less apt to hurt you in wild attempts to get away.

Use a small pen or barn stall — a place where you can get close to the calf. If it is nervous or timid, it will stay calmer if it has a buddy. It's often easier to work with two calves rather than one, as they give each other emotional security.

If the calf is fairly gentle, you can quietly push it into a corner of the stall or small pen to put on the halter. If the calf is flighty, it's best to put it in a chute to place the halter.

An adjustable nylon-rope halter with a long lead rope works well for training. A padded noseband can help prevent injury and rubbing. Have the nosepiece well up on the face to prevent slipping. The halter should be neither too loose, or it will come off, nor too tight, or it will make sores.

You may be able to start tying a gentle calf the first day you halter it; but if the calf is scared, some producers prefer to let it wear the halter a few days and drag the lead rope around in a small pen. This will get it used to the halter and the pull of the rope. As the calf steps on the rope, it pulls on its head and it has to stop.

Many people prefer removing the halter each night to reduce the risk of injury to the calf. If you do leave the halter on, be sure to check on the calves regularly to make sure they don't injure themselves.

After your calf has worn the halter a few days and has learned to stop when it steps on the rope, start tying it up. Now accustomed to the pull of the rope, your calf won't fight it as hard as it might have at first.

Wear gloves when handling the rope so it won't burn your hands if the calf tries to pull away. Catch your calf by quietly walking close enough to get hold of the trailing rope, or ease your calf into a smaller pen or stall.



ANGIE STUMP DENTON PHOTO

It takes many hours of work and training at home to ensure calves will be well-mannered and easy to handle at a show.

In a pen or large stall, have someone help you when you first tie your calf. Take a dally around a stout post and have your helper encourage the calf to move closer to the post so you can tie it at proper length. If it is scared and jumpy, get on the other side of the fence to pull the rope tight and tie it.

Tie the calf to a post, not to a pole that would allow it to pull the rope back and forth along the fence. Tie your calf at eye level, about 12-18 inches from the post. If you tie too high or too low, your calf could hurt itself if it pulls back, possibly causing muscle or spine injury. If you leave too much slack in the rope, your calf may get a foot over the rope or get tangled up, or it may twist its head around and throw itself down.

Tie the rope with a quick-release knot that can be pulled loose in an emergency. Have a pocketknife on hand so if the calf gets in a serious tangle, you can cut the rope.

After this tying session (after the calf quits fighting), turn the calf loose or you can leave the halter on and let it drag. Release the calf quietly and calmly. Don't let it jerk the rope out of your hands. Keep your training sessions as relaxed as possible while still making your calf respect you.

Check the halter each time you catch your calf to make sure it is not rubbing into the skin over its nose or under its jaw. If the halter starts to create a sore, adjust it.

#### ■ Gentle by grooming

Once the calf starts to settle down while tied, start scratching and brushing it. You can start brushing the first day you tie your calf if you have a safe way to do so (from behind the fence, for example). Brush its shoulders, back and sides, but do not brush its head. Most animals like to have you rub their neck, belly and the area on the sides of the tail that are hard for them to reach. Brushing them there will help them relax and develop trust. If you brush the calf in an area it doesn't like (such as the head), you delay the gentling process.

If the calf is nervous about your being close, use a show stick to touch and scratch it so you can stand at a safer distance, or work from behind the fence panel. After the calf relaxes, you can get closer. Work with your body close and your hands on the calf so you can move with it if it jumps around. If you're close, you're less apt to be kicked; the calf can only bump into you. Brushing the calf while it's tied is calming.

When you turn your calf loose, pull it around a little with the halter before you let it go, getting it used to responding to your pull. Short sessions repeated daily are a slow but sure way to halter-break your calf and are often safer and easier than trying to do it all at once.

#### ■ Leading

After the calf no longer pulls back on the tie rope, it can be taught to lead. A calf that will be shown at halter must learn to lead well, which usually takes many lessons.

Untie and lead your calf around the small pen before turning it loose for the day. Lead it each day when you untie it. Try for sessions of at least 10 minutes — the longer, the better.

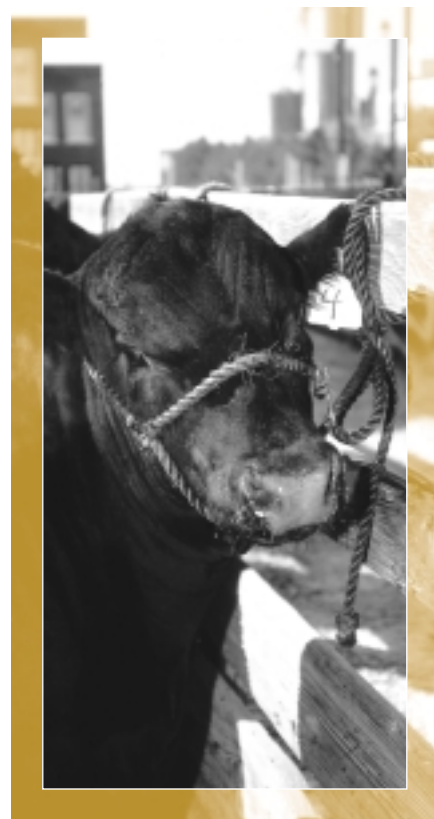
When teaching your calf to lead, pull on the rope, then give slack as it moves forward. Don't use continual pressure. When your calf learns that pressure lets up if it walks forward, it will lead. It helps to have someone walk behind your calf at first to make it move forward if it balks. You won't have to pull on its head constantly, and it will learn more quickly.

Pulling slightly to the side instead of straight forward will help you get your calf to move as it will have to take a step to keep its balance.

When leading, walk on the calf's left side and hold the lead rope in your right hand, about a foot from its halter. As you walk beside your calf, keep it under control, holding its head up. If your calf gets its head down, it will have more leverage to pull if it tries to get away from you.

Do your first training in a small pen

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MIKE BOYATT PHOTO

**Tie your calf at eye level, about 12-18 inches from the post.**

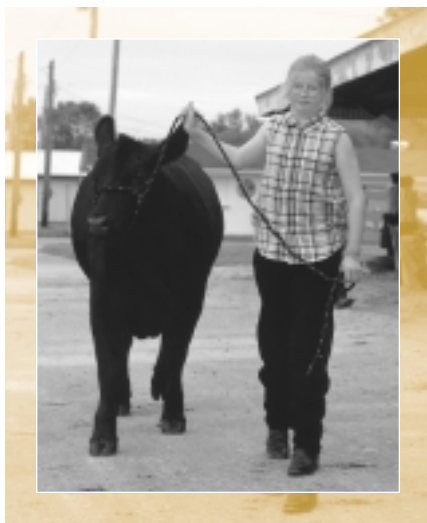
where your calf can't get up much speed and won't be so apt to bolt and drag you. Never wrap the rope around your hands, wrists or arms. Let go if your calf bolts and you can't hold it; you can always pick up the rope when he stops.

After you've led your calf a few days in the small pen and it's leading well, try a larger area. You may want someone to help in case your calf tries to go too fast or balks. Your helper can tap his rump if the calf refuses to lead. If it won't slow down, use a stick to tap its nose and halt it.

Work with your calf every day, but don't rush its training. Don't try things before the calf is ready or it may get away from you because it hasn't yet learned to fully respect the halter. Your calf is bigger and stronger than you are, so you have to convince it that the halter is the boss before you try leading it.

Once your calf learns how to lead, practice stopping and turning.

Teach your calf to stop whenever you ask it to, then scratch its belly with a show stick to relax it while standing. Since some calves resent this touching at first, you may need to wrap the lead rope around a post to keep your calf in one place while you scratch it



ANGIE STUMP DENTON PHOTO

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the first few times. Your calf eventually will enjoy this, but go easy at first.

Try to end each work session on a good note — while the calf is behaving and doing things right. Its reward will be the end of the lesson. If you have to quit when your calf is misbehaving or right after it pulls

away from you, it will think it can do that whenever it wishes and get away with it.

The show stick also can be used while leading to keep your calf from moving too fast. Hold the stick in your left hand (about one-third of the way from the handle end) so you can use the butt end for tapping your calf's nose if necessary. Train your calf to stop by lifting its head. If it stops with head raised, it will be more apt to set its feet correctly.

#### ■ Setting up

Once your calf gets used to being scratched with the show stick, use it to position the calf's feet squarely. Halt your calf, then switch the lead rope to your left hand and the show stick to your right. Place the front feet first. Push a foot back with the end of the show stick. Pull a foot forward with the prong that sticks out to the side near the end of the stick. Front feet can be positioned using the show stick or your foot, but it's safest to use the stick.

After the front feet are set squarely, set the hind feet. If your calf needs to move a hind foot back, pull backward on the halter while applying pressure with your show stick to the soft tissue between your calf's

toes on that foot. Don't jab; this spot is tender. If your calf needs to move a hind foot forward, pull forward on the halter and apply pressure with the prong of the show stick under its dewclaw. When the hind feet are too close together, apply pressure with the stick to the inside of the leg, just above the hoof.

Many showmen today are setting up their calves on profile (a more natural stance), with the back, non-show-side foot forward a couple inches.

Make sure you don't give mixed signals by inadvertently pulling the head in the wrong direction while trying to set the feet with your show stick. When pulling or pushing on the halter, apply pressure at the same time to the dewclaw to move the foot

forward or to the split of the hoof to move it backward or sideways.

After some practice the calf will understand what you want it to do. As you work with your calf, try to walk it into a show stance. In many cases it'll look more natural if you stop it with its feet placed properly.

Your calf should learn to stand still for 10-15 minutes at a time. Use the show stick to keep your calf's topline straight while standing. When it's standing correctly, gently rub under your calf's belly. Your calf will come to associate this with standing still. The rubbing helps keep your animal calm and relaxed. It also keeps its topline up and straight. Use long, slow motions with the stick, rubbing ahead of the naval area.

As training progresses, the calf should learn to stand quietly while people walk around it, as the judge will do in the showring. Have a helper act as a judge. Having different people feel the calf over its back and ribs will accustom it to being handled by strangers. To get your calf accustomed to more sounds and noises, play a radio near its stall. Start it softly, then play it louder as your calf gets used to the sound.

Work with your calf every day to make the most progress. Regular short training sessions are much better than a few long ones. The more you practice, the more manageable and cooperative your calf will be on show day.



## Halter-breaking a large group of calves

Edith Fontaine, cattle manager at Carel Farms, St. Paul, Alberta, Canada, often halter-breaks more than 100 calves a year during a three-week period. She uses a corral system that enables her to work with several animals at a time.

On the first day, six calves are haltered in a chute, enticed through an alley and put into small individual box stalls (created with portable panels). The stalls are small to closely confine the animals. They can't back up very far or fight the rope much.

A narrow alley separates each stall, providing a safe place to work outside the stall. The lead rope for each calf is tied in the alleyway. A person can stand in the alley for the first brushing sessions and can calm and relax the animal without risk of injury.

When finished with brushing, the gate is opened behind the calf so it can back up, which puts pressure on its head from the halter. Edith uses halters with metal rings, which release the pull immediately when the calf gives to pressure. The calves learn quickly that pulling backward just increases the pressure on their heads, and a step forward releases it. This

teaches them to give to pressure instead of hanging back on the halter.

The calves are left tied in the individual pens all day. Later that day they are brushed again, then turned loose into an adjacent corral (with halters left on) for the night.

On the second day they are herded into larger individual stalls and tied, where handlers enter the stalls with the calves and brush them. They are left tied until afternoon, brushed again, then led to water. During this first leading, the handler takes whatever time is needed, not fighting the calf, and the animal usually follows the handler to the

water. The calves are then brought back to the box stalls for feed, brushed again, and left tied for the night.

On the third day calves are led to water, then tied to posts in a corral, brushed and fed. Tied to the posts, they can move away from the handler, so a person must approach them carefully (not too swiftly). By the end of this third day the calves are released and considered halter-broke.

