

BE THE BOSS

Idaho rancher Heather Smith Thomas shares how to use a little cow psychology to train cows for easier handling.

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Cattle are easier to handle if they are accustomed to humans and know what to expect — and what is expected of them. They are intelligent animals. Good memories enable them to be highly adaptable and trainable.

Cattle are easy to work with if they are handled consistently and in a reasonable manner by someone who understands how they think. How a cow is handled

from calfhood, good experiences and bad, will influence her attitude toward people.

There's an old saying that you can always tell what kind of stockmen people are by their cattle. A good stockman, who handles cattle calmly and with patience, will have gentler, calmer cattle than the person who excites them during processing.



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Handling cattle properly will develop patterns of response that make your job easier. The cattle will know what to expect from you and will learn what they can and can't do.

Cattle never forget a bad experience; if they are mistreated, they will balk at getting into the same situation again. They may, for example, refuse to go into a corral or down a chute.

Try to make each handling or moving a good experience. Be aware of things that might alarm or frighten them. For instance, don't leave your jacket hanging on the corral fence to spook them or have strange people or dogs near the gate.

If cattle balk going into a corral or down a chute, try to see what they are seeing. Cattle may panic when suddenly confronted with a strange sight, sound or smell. If you try to push them too close to a scary object, they will balk and turn back.

They may relax if you give them time to check it out and discover it's no threat. Be patient. Checking it out at their own speed is one thing, but forcing them closer is something else and will put them in an entirely different frame of mind. The preservation instinct of fear and flight will assume control.

Cattle can adapt to all kinds of things if given enough time to adjust. Cattle raised in pastures next to highways aren't afraid of loud vehicles, motorcycles or honking, whereas cattle unaccustomed to these noises will become alarmed.

If they've never seen horses, cattle will become nervous when moved with horses. If they always have been moved with horses and never handled by people on foot, they may spook and run when approached by people on foot.

■ Train 'em properly

The key to easy handling is to train cattle to the way you need to work with them. Adjust them to new procedures gradually, in a nonconfrontational manner. If you introduce each new experience slowly, your job will be a lot easier.

Make sure your cattle's first experience in a corral or chute isn't painful. For example, pour on a delouser or do some other management procedure that will not cause great anxiety. If an animal's first experience in a chute is traumatic (such as branding), it may try hard never to go in the chute again.

It always helps if you can walk them calmly through a new facility before they have to undergo any painful procedures.

Knowing how cattle think and how they react to different things will allow you to train them to be manageable in all types of situations. If you will be moving them with horses, get them used to someone's riding among them. If they



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will be handled on foot, walk among them often.

Acquaint them with your corrals and working chute. Situate the corral in an area where cattle can be moved through it going from pasture to pasture. This will get them accustomed to going into the corral routinely, not just when being worked.

If cows will be calved in a confined area, acquaint the heifers with the pens before calving season. If a heifer knows where the gates are, it won't be nearly as difficult to get her into the barn when she goes into labor.

■ Replacements

If you raise your replacement heifers, you can develop a herd of manageable cows through proper handling. Make a point to walk through them a lot when they are young so they get to know you, trust you and respect you.

The easiest time to gentle cattle is at weaning, when they come to associate you with food. Teach them to come when you call. They may learn this when still on their mothers if the herd knows to come at your signal — for feed or for moving to a new pasture.

A quick way to gentle a group of weaned heifers is to feed them a few days on foot rather than from a feed truck. Walk amongst them so they come to know you. This can be done in a corral or a pasture with a wheelbarrow or a four-wheeler, taking a bale of good hay and scattering it by hand.

Even the timid, suspicious heifers will soon learn you are no threat to them, and they won't hang back for long. They'll see the bolder, more curious heifers grouping around you for the feed, and they won't want to be left out. After the first day or two they will come to the feed, too.

Even if you feed your replacement heifers out on pasture with a pickup during their first winter, take time to walk back past them, talking to them. You will soon have a herd of gentle heifers instead of wild-eyed ridge runners.

If cattle are handled properly — never moved too fast nor harassed unless they leave the herd — they learn to stay together and to move as a group.

After the hay or pellets are distributed, walk throughout the group. Talk softly to them without looking directly at them if they are suspicious or scared. If you look them in the eyes, they will think of you as a predator and become more nervous. Pretend to ignore them as you talk or sing softly, putting them at ease.

You'll soon learn which heifers are timid or wild. Give them more room as you walk by, or move past them more slowly, giving them time to become accustomed to you so you can walk by without spooking them.

Walk through your replacement heifers at feeding time for a couple of weeks or however long it takes to gentle the group, until they settle down and no longer feel threatened by a person on foot.

Some groups are more flighty than others and will need more time, or they may need refresher courses during the winter. Don't expect a bunch of heifers to stay gentle if they only see you in the feed truck, never walking on foot. Get out among them.

If you handle your cattle with horses, train them to respect a horse. Teach them they can't outrun a horse so they realize it's futile to try to run away from the herd. If handled properly, they soon learn that the safest place to be is in the herd, going the proper direction.

Yearlings are independent and sassy. They often need some lessons in respecting a horse as they learn the fundamentals of horseback herding. Never let a heifer or young cow get by with running away or hiding in the brush when you are moving cattle. If she gets away with devious behavior, she will be sure to try it again.

Cattle have good memories. Training a cow is a lot like training a horse. Build a good foundation of respect, educate her while she is young, teach good habits instead of bad ones, and she won't give you as much trouble later.

If you don't hurry cattle when moving them, they'll soon learn they are harassed least when with the group, behaving themselves. They are herd animals, so it's easy to train them to stay together. Two main reasons cattle split and try to run are that they are being pushed too hard and are trying to get away from this abuse or that they are badly frightened.

■ Pecking order

The key to easy cattle handling is understanding the social nature of cattle and their acceptance of a "pecking order" in the herd.

They readily submit to a higher-ranking herd member, so it's easy to transfer this acceptance and submission to a human handler. If cattle know and respect you, accepting you as "boss cow," they will submit much more readily to your domination, going through a gate when you insist rather than running off or knocking you down.

If you handle cattle frequently in a firm but gentle way, they will be calm and trusting, realizing you're not a threat to

be feared. They also will respect you and will not aggressively try to dominate you.

Cattle always think in terms of dominance; each herd member is either above or below a certain individual in the hierarchy. For a safe and workable relationship with cattle, you should be the top boss in their minds — not feared, but totally respected.

The top cow rarely has to defend her title; the others have all learned to respect her. She has “mind control” over them. A mere threatening gesture from her will back them off. You can use this same kind of control to your advantage when handling cattle.

A cow you are handling may try to balk at going into a corral or through a gate; but, if you have handled her properly in the past — dominating her but not abusing her — she will respect you and go through the gate instead of defying you or trying to run.

Watch a bull herd his cows. Some bulls never herd cows, but many do, especially if there’s another bull on the farm and he feels possessive of his harem. He will herd his cows away from the fence or to a far corner away from the other bull.

He quickly dominates his cows, even those that at first try to kick up their heels and run away from him. Soon all he has to do to group them is run back and forth snorting and making threatening gestures. They’ll respond by grouping together in a tight bunch to be herded. He has trained them to obey. They could split and run off in all directions to thwart him, but they don’t.

You can use to your advantage this same trainability and dominant-submissive behavior when working cattle on horseback or on foot, teaching them to respect you and to go the proper direction or to stay in the group.

If cattle try to split off, run away, hide in the brush or scatter when you are trying to herd them, they have been improperly handled or poorly trained. They haven’t learned to respect the herder, and they think they can get away. They may have gotten away in the past and want to try it again, or they may have been dogged or moved too fast and discovered their best defense was to split and scatter. This tactic buys time if they are being pushed too fast by yelling, whip-popping cowboys.

If cattle are handled properly — never moved too fast nor harassed unless they leave the herd — they learn to stay



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Even when working cattle on foot, you can accomplish the same thing if your cattle have been trained to respect you. When getting a cow into the barn or bringing in a pair from the field, they won’t be hard to handle if they are accustomed to you, accustomed to being

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handled on foot, and know they can’t get away with being devious.

They could outrun you if they chose, but they generally won’t try if you have the same mind control over them that the bull has when herding his cows. They accept you as boss, especially if they have been handled consistently in the past and never have been allowed to get away with devious behavior.

If a cranky old cow decides to run instead of going to the gate, she will still respect you if you’ve trained her to be handled on foot. Usually all you have to do is make a short run to start heading her off, speaking to her firmly, to change her mind and head her for the gate. She could easily outrun you or run over you, but when she realizes you are serious (like the bull snorting and blowing his nose at his harem), she becomes more

submissive and goes to the gate.

It’s a matter of dominance, gained by handling the cattle from the time they are young, being firm and consistent but never abusing them, and culling any truly wild or dangerous cows.

Gentle cattle can be handled easily by one person, but it often helps to have two if moving them far or into a corral. With two people you can head both sides of the herd or quietly walk a cow to the gate, with the psychological advantage of having her outnumbered.

If, when you work cattle, you take advantage of how they think, moving them with the least amount of stress (using patience and consistency), they will become easier to handle. Cattle that have good experiences when being worked become more trusting and manageable than those whose only encounters with humans are unpleasant.

Handling cattle properly will develop patterns of response that make your job easier. The cattle will know what to expect from you and will learn what they can and can’t do. Even if some of the things you must do to them are unpleasant (like vaccinations), they will be manageable and tolerant because they have been trained to submit to you. Though they may not want to go into the chute, they will.

Well-trained cattle are more pleasant and are safer to handle than wild ones. Each job can be done much more quickly and with much less stress to both you and the cattle.

