



# Hooves vs. Handlebars

Using ATVs wisely and riding the right mount is key to proper herding.

Story & photos by **Paige Nelson**, field editor

The morning sun finds the cowboys in a slow trot headed for the north pasture as it creeps over the eastern mountain range. The creaking saddles accompany the clap of bouncing saddlebags and dusters.

The steady four-beat trot gives a rhythm to the nearby meadowlark's warble. The cowhands don't say much, lost to the realm of personal thoughts, hypnotized by the desert's hymn.

Neither the Quarter Horse's familiar hum nor the boom of the startled sage hen can drown out the buzz of the bumblebee on the cactus flower — a stark contrast to the noticeable whine of the all-terrain vehicle (ATV) wrestling its way over the landscape.

In my western-grown, horse lover's heart, I hope ranching will never lose the harmony of horse and rider. Yet, my ag business background says ranching has already seen the financial impact of ATVs, and the four-wheeler will not be exiting the ranching arena any time soon.

## A way of life

"There's nothing like riding a good horse that makes a move on an old, cranky cow that thinks she can get away or just handles her so smooth that she never knew what happened to her," says Monty Pearce, registered-Angus breeder and owner of Memory Ranches in New Plymouth, Idaho.

Pearce doesn't use ATVs around his cattle

at all. He knows cattle can adjust to the use of ATVs but prefers a horse to anything.

"I think you can handle a cow a lot quieter and easier on horseback than you can on a four-wheeler," he states. "I just don't get much kick out of seeing an ATV do it."

Memory Ranch horses are relied on to get the work done. They are essential ranch tools, especially when doctoring sick animals.

"There's really no other way to rope something. I don't know that four-wheelers really work too good as rope horses," he says.

For Pearce, however, the significance of straddling a trustworthy partner is equal between getting the job done and enjoying the Western life.

"We are involved in the rural life because we enjoy livestock ... We need to be mechanized to a certain extent, but we don't have to be completely mechanized. In some places, the horse is irreplaceable," he explains.

Pearce says his customers appreciate that their bulls have been handled from horseback.

"We send a lot of bulls out to Oregon and Nevada and the rangelands of Idaho. If they haven't been handled on a horse before, I'm afraid they would be a nuisance to [our customers]," he says.

## Brakes 'n' bits

Willy Twitchell, Brigham Young University-Idaho (BYU-Idaho) animal

## Horses vs. ATVs: A cost comparison

Figures below are based on industry averages. There is a high level of variability between most operations. Insert your own numbers to more accurately gauge costs associated with ATV and horse ownership.

### ATV Annual Cost of Ownership: \$1,762

Honda Rancher ATV

Retail: **\$6,200**

Average miles per gallon: 25

Cost per gallon of gas: \$2.33 (current average)

Annual mileage: 1,200

Annual gas cost: **\$112**

Recommended inspection every 600 miles: **\$100** (assuming \$50 for self-service, \$300 for shop service)

▶ service parts: oil, oil filter, air filter, labor

Depreciation cost after one year: **\$1,550**

Resale value after four years based on a tax depreciation schedule: **\$1,907**

Source: Figures courtesy of Dan Walker, ATV salesman.

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science professor and cattle behavior and handling professional, believes both the horse and the ATV are useful on the modern ranch. He also believes the overall decision of which to use is probably based on preference and tradition over anything else.

He says using an ATV to work cattle is no different than using a horse or doing it on foot.

“It’s just habituating or acclimating the cattle to that form of movement, but you’re still following the same rules of staying outside of pressure zones,” he says. “I know people that can herd cattle with snow machines.”

Initially, the ATV’s noise can be a stress factor, he explains, but once the cattle adjust, so it is no longer novel, the stress response decreases dramatically.

The best use of an ATV may not be driving it behind a herd of cattle. Twitchell says the timesaving factor of an ATV is something in which horses just can’t compete.

“On the big allotments, those we find out on public grazing ground in the West, especially those stocked with low AUMs (animal unit months), you can cover a lot of miles with an ATV. Checking cattle and covering the ranch with an ATV saves you time, and probably your animal husbandry improves because you’re able to see more animals in a day than a horse could do,” he states.

He recognizes that even the ATV is limited by terrain and in tight spots horses rule.

“If the terrain is rough enough that the ATV can’t go there, then there the horse would be better,” he advises, “but just the sheer fact of being able to cover so many



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miles to check on cattle or to start finding where the cattle are, before sending in horses, the ATV is a great advantage.”

From an environmental standpoint, says Twitchell, ATVs are known to leave ample evidence behind. Horses darn sure leave marks too, he says, but they are more environmentally friendly than ATVs.

In critical situations, like when a cow is headed the wrong direction or is quitting the herd altogether, Twitchell says, ATVs make it easier to apply more pressure than is necessary — running the animal around.

“A cowboy usually tries to preserve his horse for a full day’s work, so he’s going to try to work a little smarter. Your ATV never gets tired; it just might run out of gas.

“ATVs do make it easier to not practice good handling skills,” he cautions.

### Flight response

“Herding using helicopters falls under the same paradigm,” says Twitchell, “as ATVs and horses.” He explains that Bud Williams, a renowned animal handler, taught helicopter pilots to gather big pastures using the same principles they would use if they were on foot, horseback or driving an ATV — using straight lines and applying the “T” method.

Helicopters still apply pressure to the animal’s flight zone, says Twitchell, but they use the novelty of something flying from the sky to get a response.

“The helicopter is a herding tool. It’s just used in a different way, but regardless of the tool, stockmanship has to take a forefront,” says Twitchell.

If using a helicopter to herd cattle seems financially out of reach, maybe a drone is

the answer. Under current regulations, using unmanned aircraft, or drones, for herding cattle would be considered commercial use and, therefore, is prohibited by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), says Quinn Jackson, IT manager/software developer for Land View Inc. in Rupert, Idaho, a drone retailer.

Unless, Jackson adds, the producer applies for a license through the FAA and can prove his or her use of a drone is not harmful in any way to anyone else.

Imagine checking water, salt and supplements; scoping the range for cattle; and, yes, using drones to change pastures. Jackson says drones are capable and Twitchell doesn’t see why they couldn’t be used on a ranch.

“Drones would act just like a helicopter would. You’re bumping their flight zone using noise and the novelty of flight,” Twitchell says.

### Safety issues

In 2013 the University of Kentucky surveyed 1,149 beef cattle operations, all members of the Kentucky Cattlemen’s Association. The survey’s goal was to examine farm-management practices in association with risk of cattle-related injury among farm workers. Herd sizes ranged from two to 3,500 head. Using adjusted analysis, the survey found that using ATVs or side-by-sides was associated with a significantly reduced risk of cattle-related injury compared to other herding methods like horses or dogs.

Twitchell attributes the survey’s results to the culture of the ranch. Many ranches, he says, allow cowboys to ride their own horses, so many will bring young colts for on-the-job training.

### Horses vs. ATVs: A cost comparison

**Horse Annual Cost of Ownership: \$1,230**

5-year-old ranch horse

Retail: **\$5,000**

Feed: **\$438**

► alfalfa hay @ \$160/ton

► feeding rate of 20 lb./day for 273 days (assuming three months on pasture)

Farrier service: **\$200**

► \$50/service, four services/year

Vaccines and wormer: **\$56**

► influenza, tetanus, eastern and western equine encephalomyelitis, rhinopneumonitis: \$40

► wormer: \$16

**Depreciation cost after one year: \$536**

Resale value after four years based on a tax depreciation schedule: \$2,692

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Cowboys doing ranch work on green colts can skew the way we see these results, he explains. “I’d say the majority of horse-related ranch injuries happen on young colts. It might be a colt that just doesn’t know its footing in the mountains, so it falls down more, or you can’t get away from a cow that is on the fight, or you get in a fight with the colt and it rears over backward and breaks your back,” he says.

“A four-wheeler is going to be the exact same every time you jump on it, and the majority of injuries do not come from your nice seasoned ranch horse,” he adds.

Pearce agrees, saying, “I think that both [ATVs and horses] have their wrecks.”

“People need to know the kind of horse they have,” Pearce advises. “We see people using race horses as ranch horses. That’s kind of putting a round peg in a square hole.

“A horse that’s really bred to be a ranch horse has a calm nature and willingness. You rarely ever have those horses give you a bad time.”

A horse breeder himself, Pearce relates ranch horse selection to cattle breeding.

“The Angus breed has been looking for docility in cattle. We have an EPD (expected

progeny difference) for it now. We ride different horses today than when I was a kid 50 years ago,” he says. “If you select that horse for disposition, you won’t have problems. People need to be as smart about that as they are about breeding cattle.”

### **A use for both**

Basically, the choice between ATVs and horses for herding and handling purposes comes down to the preference and tradition of the ranch. Both are tools. They can be used as complements or separately.

Dart guns offer ATV users the option to doctor cattle without a four-legged helper, in addition to aforementioned uses, while horses remain a traditional part of ranching and a way of life for those with the love of mane and tail.

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**Editor's Note:** *Paige Nelson is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Rigby, Idaho.*

► Willy Twitchell, professional animal handler, says once cattle become acclimated to ATVs, they can be handled just as quietly as someone on horseback or on foot.

