



Cow-calf environment, management and care support quality beef.

Story & photos by **Kaitlin Morgan**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

When choosing genetics, selection can now be made for just about anything, but traits such as docility and carcass quality go beyond the point of conception.

Bob and Becky Avery, commercial Angus producers near Olsburg, Kan., know there are many genetic components to success, but their calves can't reach full potential unless the environment allows it.

Reinventing “the cowboy way,” they traded the excitement of roping cattle for the enjoyment of working with them. They improved the docility, health and overall quality of their herd along the way.

Starting them off right

“Both of us think it's important to give those calves a good start,” says Becky. “Then you're ahead as they go through life.”

That begins within two days of birth when they not only tag and castrate, but also inject each calf with a clostridial vaccination, trace minerals and vitamins.

Then come the shuttle rides. Calving season begins in early March, but no matter the weather, every couple of days a stock trailer takes cow-calf pairs away. They leave

the birthing pasture near the house for a larger one where open ground reduces the spread of scours and other diseases.

If you keep the herd together in close quarters — calved and uncalved — advice and experience told the Averys to expect a scoury calf; then, a pregnant cow will lie down and get the bacteria on her udder.

“It's the idea that the cow is contaminated before she ever has the calf,” says Bob. “So that calf doesn't even have a chance. When she calves, the first thing her calf gets is a mouth full of scours. By moving them to another pasture and giving them these vaccines, you up their immune system right off the bat.”

Handle with care

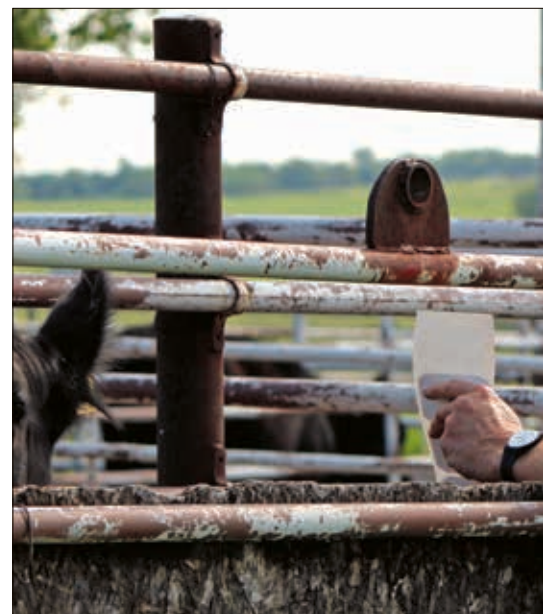
Bob Larson, production medicine veterinarian at Kansas State University (K-State), recommends raising docile cattle that are relatively easy to handle, because it helps avoid stress in individual cattle and the people who manage them.

“Implementing low-stress cattle handling with the goal to move cattle quietly and with a minimum risk of injury and stress has many positive benefits for both ranchers

and cattle,” he says. Health benefits include better identification of sick animals and reduced stress, “a known contributor to many illnesses.”

When Bob Avery graduated from K-State, he took a job on a cattle ranch and set about “cowboying” the stock regularly, as he thought that was just the way things were done.

He's roped a lot of cattle in his life, but now he saves those skills for the arena. Once



► **Above:** Bob and Becky Avery are proud of the land they graze, the cattle for which they care and the quality of Angus genetics they breed.

► **Right:** Since switching management styles, Becky Avery finds herself looking forward to each opportunity to work with the cattle because she knows it won't be stressful on her, Bob or the animals.

35 Keys to Success

Animal Welfare

he switched to low-stress cattle handling, his job became easier, he says. Cattle weren't sick as often, they were easy to drive to the pen, and roping just wasn't necessary anymore.

"I kind of miss that whole cowboy deal," says Bob. "It's just not as exciting anymore; but if it's exciting, then we did something wrong."

Twenty-five years ago, the Averys learned the Bud Williams (www.stockmanship.com) approach to low-stress cattle handling and since then have molded it to fit into their operation.

"I think changing the way we handle our cattle was one of the best things we did," says Becky. "First of all, it makes the cattle calmer, and they're more trusting of us. Second, when we work cattle together, we get along much better."

Trust is key

Everyone has heard calving-season stories of nasty cows that will send a cowboy right back to the shelter of his pickup for even thinking of tagging their calves, but the Averys don't seem to have that problem as they work day-old calves.

A cow will sometimes have her head right up next to Bob, licking his hand or just watching what he's doing, but she won't be mad at him because she has trust, he says.

Low-stress cattle management doesn't require new equipment, but it may require a new mind-set.

"When cattle are in an environment that is calm, quiet and unthreatening, they will begin to relax," he says, explaining Williams' ideas. "If you never do something to scare them or hurt them, they will learn to trust."



► Just having a cow come this close is unique, but when standing in the pasture, the cattle are so docile that even 3-month-old calves will come up to Bob and lick his hand.

That philosophy isn't built upon the "flight zone" positioning often used for strategic animal handling. Bob compares working with cattle this way to the trust built by Robert Redford's character in *The Horse Whisperer*.

"If you can just explain to your horse in a way he understands, he'll do anything you want; and cows are the exact same way," he says. "If we present it to them in a way that's nonthreatening, they're willing to do anything we want to do."

The change in management style has helped cut down on herd health problems, all stemming from lower stress.

Defuse stressful times

Like a freshman leaving for college, weaning can be one of the most stressful times in a calf's life. Larson says it can increase the risk for disease and, even though months before harvest, it can impact carcass quality.

To head that off, the Averys treat weaning as a process rather than an event.

Three to four weeks ahead of when they plan to begin the process, they lead the herd in and give each calf another round of vaccinations. Then, a week before separation, they start feeding cows and calves along a fenceline. Once a majority of the calves are coming up to eat, they move cows to an adjoining pasture. No roping, corrals or stock trailers.

With their docile cattle, Bob stands in the middle of the gate that cows will pass through easily; calves are more cautious so they stay back. That is how simple their fenceline weaning process is.

The calves are accustomed to the pasture, have begun learning how to eat and can still

see their moms for emotional support. It doesn't completely eliminate the bawling, but after a half hour most calves have eaten and are lying down.

The Averys haven't always used fenceline weaning, but after seeing the improved calf health and gains, they won't ever go back. With other weaning methods, they had seen morbidity rates of 20%-25%, which now seems so avoidable.

"Even if you would never lose a calf, the loss of gain and medication posed a loss," says Bob. "These calves, I'm almost certain, are gaining from the second day with no medication, so there's a huge financial impact between the two."

He doesn't retain ownership in the feedlot, but sells them to a friend who reports on their progress. In a pen of last year's feeder calves, only one steer had to be doctored, and he was only treated once.

Enjoy the beef you raise

The Avery ranch is simpler than most. The couple doesn't raise crops but devotes their time to caring for the cattle and native grass — more than 1,000 acres where 140 females calve in the spring.

They have learned to work with their animals to find the management style that works for them, just as Larson suggests all producers do.

Health and docility are valuable components all along the beef production chain, he says. Reducing stress in cattle handling will not only produce a steak that is enjoyable to eat, but enjoyable to raise.



Editor's Note: Kaitlin Morgan is an industry information intern with Certified Angus Beef LLC.