

Healthy Handling

The sustainability of ranching operations and of families who can harmoniously work together may be some of the best spin-off benefits derived from effectively handled livestock.



by **Kim Holt**

Ron Gill is a presenter, educator and promoter of the effective stockmanship concept because he knows it works. He says: “There’s a real need for it and there’s interest in it. And where we have a commitment to change, from ownership/management on down, you can see some real differences.”

Proactive on behalf of producers

Gill, a professor and Extension livestock specialist for Texas AgriLife Extension, has worked

on cattle handling, both personally and professionally, “for a long time,” he says. He conducted his first stockmanship clinic in 1996, and his commitment to this educational effort takes him cross-country to work with producers, livestock markets and feedyards, among others.

The last six years he has conducted the industry-sponsored Stockmanship & Stewardship clinics with Curt Pate, a Montana rancher and well-respected horse and stockmanship clinician. Stockmanship & Stewardship uses live cattle demonstrations to inform beef producers about the importance and benefits of proper cattle handling — and its critical role in increasing consumer confidence in beef.

As a rancher, too, Gill has seen the results of the practices he’s so committed to teaching. He explains that his ranch was experiencing higher death loss and lower gains in loads of high-risk, newly weaned calves purchased through auction markets for its preconditioning yard managed by his brother, Richard.

“So we got more serious about actually settling those cattle as they came in, trying to reduce their stress level in order to get them more accustomed to people and their surroundings.” He said results were almost immediate.

“We saw about a 2% drop in death loss,” he says. “But from that point on, our death loss dropped to near nothing. And

our gains went up about a quarter of a pound per day.

“We weren’t getting along too badly from the start, but thought we could do better and sure enough we did.” Of the acclimation process, Gill reports, “It actually didn’t take much time at all — just a little bit of effort.”

Cattle were never allowed to run out of gates but were always made to walk out past the handler, down the alleyway to holding pens. If they got to trotting in corrals, “we’d go back and settle them again and place them on the feedbunk.” Normally they wouldn’t walk and bawl past the first day.

Gill realizes he and Richard should have put these practices into play earlier. But he hadn’t taken the time to train everybody at the yard. “That was my fault for not doing this to start with. We have always done this with our ranch calves, but never with a set of put-together cattle.”

He continues, “I think that’s one of the big problems with our industry — we don’t take the time to train everybody and get all on the same page. A lot of us know a lot more than what we’re actually doing — whether it’d be with technology or just management I think we can all re-focus and do things a little better.”

He also observes that after they started acclimating calves, their weight gains and death rate both benefited, so “we didn’t have to purchase as many cattle to accomplish what we wanted to do.” That’s a lesson certainly for others in this industry too.

Improved livestock handling benefits

The Gills’ example is but one illustration of how improvements in livestock handling can have direct economic benefits through reduced sickness, reduced labor and improved gains.

“The increase of performance is really recognizable at weaning through the finishing phase of cattle — you see a big difference there,” Gill says, but it’s not as easy to measure at the cow-calf level. The biggest differences they’re seeing at that level are in savings from facility design.

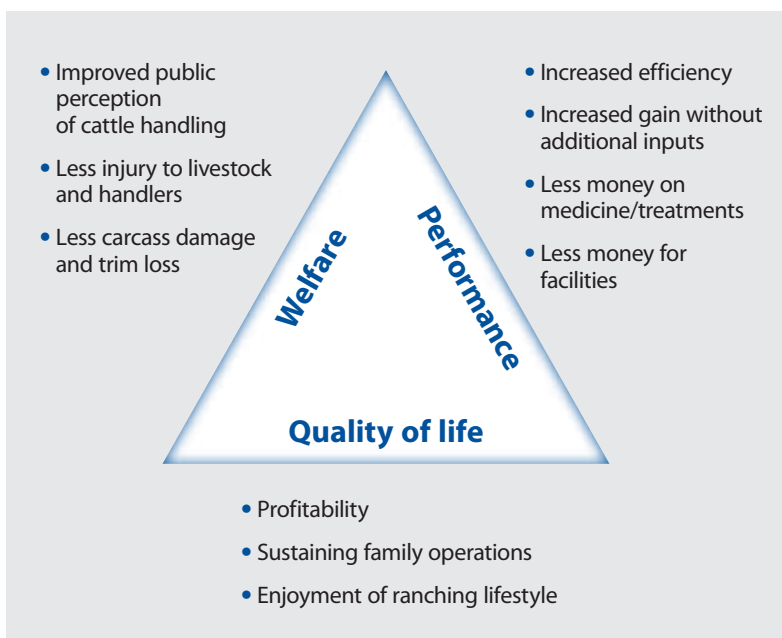
One Texas ranch Gill’s been working with estimates it has saved \$15,000 just in facility cost. Instead of building tub systems for both load out and processing areas, it used existing facilities with Bud Boxes, a concept designed by stockman Bud Williams, for both locations.

While savings in facilities can be significant, “It does take a commitment to change how you handle livestock,” Gill assures. “Dr. Temple Grandin can engineer it where nearly anybody can get cattle through a system. That’s



PHOTO BY ROSS HECOCK/WESTERN HORSEMAN

Ron Gill has conducted effective stockmanship clinics for 15 years. The past six years he’s also presented the industry-sponsored Stockmanship & Stewardship clinics with rancher and clinician Curt Pate.



This triangle illustrates why effective stockmanship is important to both producers and the beef industry. Curt Pate, a Montana rancher and well-respected stockmanship clinician, believes that low-stress livestock handling is a win-win for both beef producers and consumers. It improves performance, so it is a good fit for profit-minded ranchers, and it gives consumers the assurance that food animals have been treated right.

Source: Effectivestockmanship.com



PHOTO BY BETH HARBRELL-MACKENZIE

the difference — if you're willing to take the time to learn how to use their (cattle) behavior to your advantage, you can sure save a lot of money."

Gill is also quick to admit that not all benefits of effective stockmanship are monetary. There are many spin-off benefits, including the sustainability of ranching operations and of families who can harmoniously work together.

"There's a lot of family strife that actually occurs when working cattle because of frustration," he remarks. "If everybody can stay quiet and calm, the cattle stay better, the help stays better. We see a lot of kids who don't want to go home and work with their dads, but they'll work with granddad."

Some of the most rewarding comments Gill has received from the Stockmanship & Stewardship program have nothing to do with handling cattle. He says, "We've had numerous people come up and tell us that it's made a difference in their relationship with their family members and how they work livestock."

"That goes into that quality of life aspect of this that we've talked about — the sustainability of family operations."

Putting effective handling into play

In order to learn more about effective stockmanship, Gill encourages producers and families to do "whatever they can," whether it be reading articles, watching videos or attending low-stress handling seminars. Over the years, low-stress handling experts Tom Noffsinger, DVM, and the late Bud Williams have both been influential for Gill.

"We've found through the Stewardship & Stockmanship clinics that a lot of people who have seen Bud or Dr. Noffsinger's videos will come up and say 'it now makes sense.'" Gill explains, "You can see it on the video, but

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can't measure the dynamics of the interactions with the cattle. That's why we're still committed to doing these live demos."

It's his belief there aren't enough people like him working one-on-one with industry stakeholders. "But there are also not enough people asking us to do it to justify getting more people involved," Gill explains.

But still, adopting changes in livestock handling needs to remain a front-burner issue within the industry, Gill assures, especially as the industry comes under more scrutiny from consumers and activist groups.

"To me it's a pretty urgent issue. We are making inroads — last year I think we've seen more

Ten keys to effective cattle handling

- 1) The only way to work cattle quickly is slowly.
- 2) Work from the front to draw cattle to you.
- 3) Apply pressure when cattle have a place to go.
- 4) Pressure from the side.
- 5) Cattle must be comfortable to go by you and stay straight.
- 6) Pressure cattle from behind only when absolutely necessary.
- 7) When working cattle, move in straight lines and triangles.
- 8) Going with the flow of cattle slows them down or stops their movement.
- 9) Going against the flow of cattle initiates or accelerates their movement.
- 10) Cattle work best when they are ready — you have to get them there.



What is stockmanship?

The handling of cattle with the intent of enhancing profitability through:

- 1) improving consumer confidence that cattlemen are good stewards of livestock;
- 2) improving the safety of animals as well as handlers by working with the natural instincts of cattle during handling; and
- 3) using low-stress handling techniques to enhance animal health and assure a higher response to medicines.

change than in the previous three. But this is one that we really need everyone to stay hooked on until we do make some changes," Gill says.

He points to the antibiotics issue, as an example. Most

of the antibiotic use in calves occurs in that 60-day window following weaning.

"If we can reduce sickness rates in weaned calves, we'll do a lot to alleviate the pressure there. Changing how we manage through that stress level won't fix it all," he says, "but we can do a lot as far as consumer perception of our industry and less use of antibiotics through effective, low-stress handling of our livestock." **HW**

Editor's Note: For effective stockmanship training information, go to Ranchtv.org. This site features numerous video clips featuring Ron Gill and Curt Pate demonstrating effective handling techniques. Gill's site, Effectivestockmanship.com, also offers a summary of low-stress cattle handling pointers, along with diagrams of the "Bud Box" concept for cattle pens. For Bud William's low-stress handling methods, see Stockmanship.com.

Effective stockmanship is based on four basic principles of cattle behavior:

Cattle want to see you.

Cattle want to go around you.

Cattle want to go to and be around other cattle.

Cattle can only think of one thing at a time.

