



Follow Its Nose

and Other Stockmanship Strategies

An animal handling expert shares his tips for effectively moving cattle.

by *Kindra Gordon*

The onset of summer means a steady flow of working the cow herd — breeding, branding and giving calf vaccinations, moving through summer grass pastures, and preconditioning and weaning. But are your stockmanship techniques ensuring a “good flow” for low-stress cattle movement?

Curt Pate, a nationally renowned horse trainer and stockman, suggests stockmanship can be a valuable tool. He notes, “It’s not only about working animals; it’s about understanding animals. You need to be able to look at animals and know if they are content — if they have what they need.”

What’s the most common mistake livestock handlers make?

Pate says it is people walking behind the animal (or the herd) and trying to push it forward. He blames society for this approach, saying, “Society makes people get in line. It’s programmed into our brains to get in the back of the line and then move forward. So, when we work livestock, we do the exact same thing.”

But, once you recognize that cattle’s range of vision is different from a human’s, you will quickly realize that walking behind the

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animal is the wrong approach, Pate says.

Vision important

He explains that because an animal’s eyes are on the side of its head, it can see a wide area — almost 360 degrees when its head is down for grazing. But, its vision is not very precise. As a result, when a person approaches, the animal will turn its head to look. Pate says, “As you come up to the center of the animal’s eye, you are more in focus to them. But when the animal turns its head, it also must change its direction.”

Thus, Pate’s rule for handling cattle is to place yourself where the animal can always see you. He says, “I don’t try to work the

whole animal; I try to work the animal's nose."

He explains that where the animal's nose points, the rest of the body usually follows. "If you can always see that nose, the animal can see you," Pate says.

Pate likes to work at a 45 degree angle from the front of the animal. He calls this the focus point (another industry term is balance point), saying, "That's when they start listening to you." For each animal and depending on the environment, the focus point can be different.

He gives the example of sorting cattle and explains, once the animal sees you with both eyes, as you step forward, the animal will begin to move. If you step back, it will stop — or, if you move out of its focus point and it must turn its head to see you better, it will turn away.

Pate adds, "If the animal starts to move the wrong way, you must stop and step back and start over. Then move forward where she can see you better."

As the animal begins to move forward in the desired direction, walk with it, Pate says — but not from behind. Instead, walk along its side in a zigzag pattern as a border collie would.

If the animal is not moving in the right direction, he reiterates, "Always be willing to stop and start again."

Pressure points

Regarding cattle movement, one of Pate's fundamental techniques is the use of pressure. He says, "Pressure is what stimulates animals to move," and uses the analogy of a storm prompting animals to move forward to seek shelter.

He explains, "It's all about putting yourself in the right place at the right time with the animals to give the right amount of pressure, and then releasing animals to do what you've asked them to do."

He notes that in some situations, such as moving cattle into a chute or semi-trailer, more pressure may be needed. He emphasizes that you

do not want to panic the animals, but you may need to increase the pressure being applied to keep them moving.

He shares, "When cattle are too gentle, it makes them more difficult to move." As well, he says, "I'm not against hot shots. I think they are one of the most humane tools we have if they are used properly."

But he also cautions against too much pressure and putting cattle into a panic mode. He explains that when you are working with an animal, you are working with its brain. He describes the animal's brain as having two sides: a thinking side and a surviving — or reaction — side.

"Animals use the thinking side in instances like grazing. They are deciding what to do and what to eat," says Pate.

Conversely, he describes the survival mode as an animal in panic — something really scares it. Signs include the head of the animal rising up, its eyes widening, its tail raising and it is looking to get away.

"In survival mode, they are not thinking, they are reacting. If animals are in survival mode too long and stressed so much, their immune system can shut down," Pate says.

Recognizing this, Pate says the first lesson a good stockman learns is to never stress an animal to the point of shifting it into survival mode. "If an animal does reach that point, you've got to back the pressure off," Pate says.

Additionally, Pate points out that animals have incredible memories. He says, "We've got to remember, any negative things we do to animals, they never want to get in that situation again." Even sound can cause a negative experience that can stress animals. "Bull whips and rattle paddles get animals to not trust us," Pate says.

Pate acknowledges that stockmanship skills are honed through trial and error. And to that end he suggests to other stockmen, "When you get done working cattle, take time to analyze what you did well

and what you did wrong. Then, next time, don't make that mistake again."

He adds, "The more you think and work at it and analyze your efforts after you get done working with a group of livestock, the better you'll become. And, it'll improve your quality of life and improve our quality of beef." **HW**

Editor's Note: Pate is a regular speaker at industry events and shared his stockmanship tips this winter at the Range Beef Cow Symposium in Ft. Collins, Colo., and the Cattle Industry Convention and Trade Show in San Diego, Calif.

Mood matters

As a final tip, Curt Pate, nationally renowned horse trainer and stockman, emphasizes that the mood of the people working the cattle can influence the cattle's movement and reactions. He says, "I believe cattle can read people better than we can read them."

He tells the story of a producer who was mad while sorting cattle, and the cattle would not go by him. Pate says, "Fear, anger, whatever it is that is affecting your mood, cattle pick up on that. So it is real important to keep your attitude right while working with livestock."

The bottom line is to take time and to go slowly. "Stockmanship to me is like a highway roundabout," Pate says. He explains that those circular intersections make people think as they navigate through the curves and outlets. Likewise, Pate says, "Stockmanship while working with livestock is kind of a roundabout. You've got to think. It's tough. It's a skill." **HW**

