



SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

Feedyard cowboys are integral in health and husbandry.

Story & photos by Kasey Brown, associate editor

Check the weather compulsively. Always have several changes of clothes in the truck. Your best co-worker costs a lot and doesn't speak — well, with words, anyway. It takes a special person with grit to be a feedyard cowboy. What does it take to become a good one?

Rick Temple, cowboy at Cattleman's Choice feedyard in Gage, Okla., has seen both sides of the feedbunk, working on a ranch in Nebraska for 11 years and at two feedyards in Kansas for 15 years before that.

Part intuition, part trial and error, a good cowboy learns the tricks of the trade on the job, Temple says.

"The only way you're really going to learn this job is you've just got to go out and do it," he says. "You can read every book in the world. You can go to these — we used to call them 'cowboy college.' They

put on these little seminars. You can always pick something up with these; don't get me wrong. They're really, really neat, but it's the school of hard knocks."

Best tip

The best piece of advice he got, and shares with young cowboys, is to ride the pen before you ever go in. He says to look over your pen from the gate, and then go through the cattle. He looks for depressed cattle, but knows that when he and his horse are in the pen, they can be good actors.

"You always want to look them

back over when you ride out," he says, explaining it's a natural defensive instinct for cattle to perk up and look like the rest of the herd when a potential predator is present. "Then after you go by, they'll go back into more of the depressed look. You look back over your shoulder, and you can sometimes see and go back in and get them."

Temple encourages pen riders to go through their cattle slowly.

"New guys will say, 'Get your cattle up. Get most of your cattle up.' I say, 'Don't try to ride as fast as everybody else. Don't leave the pen until you're comfortable,'" he advises young cowboys. "You can't expect to ride as fast as somebody that has done it for a few years, because it's just not going to happen.

"Don't leave the pen until you're comfortable, and always look back

over your shoulder," he emphasizes.

Art of husbandry

A good pen rider knows it's his job to find sick cattle so they can be nursed back to health. He takes this responsibility seriously. It means noticing all of the small details. It's the art of husbandry.

He says he's looking for little things — a calf holding its head differently, a sway in its back.

"Really watch their breathing. When it really gets hot, they're all breathing hard then, but you just learn the way they breathe, how deep it is, and you look for different signs," he says humbly. "It's really hard to put into words, because you just look at them and know it. This is just the job. You can go to school, but you're not going to learn it overnight."

It's easy to say you have to notice all of the small details, but every day is different. Those differences can severely stress cattle.

Temple says he checks the weather at least three times a day. In northwestern Oklahoma, the weather can change on a dime. He mentions 60-70 mile per hour winds and how that can blow a feed container or a bag into a pen. He chuckles and says they were fixing fence on that pen shortly after.

Feed changes can stress cattle. As cattle are acclimated to the feedyard, they step up in rations, and that must be done carefully to keep them on a forward trajectory.

Their origin can also affect this.

"We get a lot of ranch calves, and they are actually pretty hard to ride, because they stay pretty full. I've worked at yards where we've got cattle in out of [far away] or we get sale barn cattle. They were actually easier to ride because they'd stand in the back of the pens with their head on the ground, just like a neon sign 'Pull me.' These other cattle will be up at the bunk, and they keep really good fill on them.

"You've got to really, really pay attention; and you've got to look at

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the bunk as hard as you look at the rest of it. Because they don't go off feed until it's too late usually," he explains.

When storms are coming, or a big weather change, he says he pulls more cattle for the sick bay than normal. Cattle will get sick before a storm, he says, then grinningly admits those pulled during a storm are just the ones you missed the day before.

After the storm, he cautions, pen riders need to pay attention, because calves get stressed during a storm, and that means you'll be pulling more.

Cattleman's Choice feedyard specializes in program cattle, those destined for specialty markets like non-hormone treated cattle (NHTC), natural, Global Animal Partnership (GAP) and age- and source-verified. This means an added layer of husbandry is needed from the cowboys.

It's a tricky line to balance the animal's welfare if they are truly

sick or disqualifying that calf for the program if they aren't. On hot days, you'll obviously find hot cattle, but do they need antibiotics to get them over the hump? He says they can pull those questionable cattle and will do a lung score on them with Merck's Whisper® Veterinary Stethoscope System. Whisper will analyze a calf's lungs combined with whether it has a fever.

He also says they do have a few mitigation options that won't kick a calf out of the program but will make the calf more comfortable. He likens this to how humans can take ibuprofen for a headache and they don't need antibiotics.

Getting started

As with most in the cattle business, Temple does this job because he loves it. There are



Rick Temple has worked both on the ranch side and the feedyard side for 28 years. He has learned how to judge cattle's well-being through intuition and hard-earned experience.

much easier and more lucrative jobs out there.

He prefers working on horseback. To do that, he needs four or five good horses to switch out because feedyard work is hard on their backs opening gates so often. Those horses need to be "bulletproof," because there is a lot going on in a feedyard. There are feedtrucks running, loaders moving, cattle coming in and out.

You need good tack to relieve some of the strain on their backs.

He also jokes that he has three closets full of clothes at home. When you work outside all day, every day, it's best to be prepared.

Being a cowboy is not for the weak at heart. He's checking cattle whether it's 20° F below zero or 110° F, raining, snowing and everything in between. In the summer

he checks cattle as soon as there's enough sunlight to see the hand in front of his face, and he will come back at sunset to check again. Cattle still need to be checked on Sundays and holidays. That heart also drives a cowboy.

Temple knows he has to take care of the cattle and the customers. They rely on his skills to keep those cattle healthy. ■