

# GET 'EM MOTHERED UP



## Tips for keeping calves by mama's side.

Story & photo by Troy Smith, field editor

**Y**ou've been there, right? Maybe you were in charge, a hired hand or a neighbor helping for the day, but you've likely seen it happen plenty of times. It's that all-too-familiar scene where the crew has made their circle of the pasture, gathered the cow-calf pairs and started pushing the herd toward the gate. Wise to the routine, the cows hurry right on through that gate, along with some of the calves. That bunch of calves dawdling along at the back of the herd can't seem to see the opening.

You know what happens next. Those lag-behind calves stop, turn around and stare at the handlers, who commence with much whooping and waving of arms. Or it might be shrill whistles, slapping of chap leather, or revving ATV engines as the crew tries to spook the calves through the gate. Amid the commotion, some calves may comply, but they might just as easily join those calves already breaking through the handlers. With tails aloft, the escapees race back to the pasture and that place

where they last enjoyed mama's comfort.

Surely you could tell a few stories like that, with minor variations perhaps. You've been there as the handlers huddled to catch their breath, while the ramrod explained "Plan B." You could tell how, in one way or another, the errant calves were caught or corralled. Cattle folk get 'er done in the end. Yet, can you explain why such scenes play out so frequently all across cow country? Is that just "normal," or

could those situations have been prevented?

### A better Plan A

Veterinarian Kip Lukasiewicz's advice for cow-calf producers is to consider how to formulate a better "Plan A." Since cattle behavior is often a result of their handlers' behavior, Lukasiewicz thinks producers should reflect on past mistakes and avoid repeating them. They can start by adopting better cattle-handling techniques.

"Each time cow-calf producers

do anything with their cattle, it is an opportunity for intervention — an opportunity to provide training that can have a long-term positive effect," offered Lukasiewicz, during last spring's Production Animal Consultation (PAC) Beef Summit, hosted in Kearney, Neb.

The PAC associate and St. Paul, Neb., practitioner talked about how scenes like that described earlier might have been prevented if handlers had trained cow-calf pairs to "mother up." Sure, sure, that's supposed to be instinctive behavior to a cow and her calf, but it's variable under many modern production systems. Typically, training to reinforce mother-up behavior will pay dividends. According to Lukasiewicz, it should start on Day 1.

### Start at birth

"Weaning starts the day a calf is born, literally," he stated, noting how every interaction with cattle



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— tagging, rotating pastures and processing — can influence their well-being and performance. “We should want everything we do to help each calf maximize its genetic potential. That should include how we interact with pairs. We should be encouraging the maternal bond.”

Lukasiewicz advised producers to have this in mind whenever they are checking cattle during calving season. He recommended moving among the animals in a nonthreatening way and encouraging young calves to get up, go to their mothers and nurse. Alternatively, cows can be urged to find their babies. Doing this consistently helps instill mother-up behavior as the expected response to the arrival of handlers.

Lukasiewicz said calving season is the best time to acclimate pairs to the presence of handlers on foot, on horseback or in vehicles, so they become accustomed to all of the various methods. Stock

handlers do themselves no favor by hurrying the process of acclimation or handling for any purpose. Lukasiewicz said this is particularly true when applying ear tags to new calves.

“Don’t be in a big hurry to just get it done,” he said. “I advise producers to allow some time for



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the cow and calf to bond. Consider waiting until a calf is at least 12 hours old before tagging.”

Rather than making an aggressive beeline for the calf, Lukasiewicz recommended a slow, measured approach that starts with “greeting the cow.” The handler moves in slowly, backing up a step or two and changing the angle of approach as necessary, until the cow becomes comfortable with the handler’s presence. Practiced, respectful handlers can even coax the calf to come to them. When the calf is under control, rub and pinch its ear a little bit before tagging. Typically, desensitizing its ear makes the calf less likely to beller and bolt when the tag is applied. When finished, turn the calf toward its mother to release it, back away and encourage the pair to mother up.

Time devoted to training cows and calves to “act as pairs” pays off when the herd must be moved to a different pasture or corralled for

processing. After gathering the herd, but before moving it, Lukasiewicz recommends holding the cattle loosely for a half-hour or so, allowing cows and calves to mother up and nurse.

“Don’t tell me you can’t take 30 minutes to get them paired and allow calves to suckle,” states Lukasiewicz. “It will save time in the end if they travel as pairs. You’re less likely to have a group of calves in the rear, trying to go back. The last animals through the gate should be a pair. If you train them and handle them right, it just makes life a lot easier on the day you need to move them.”

### Prepare for weaning

Lukasiewicz also talked about opportunities to prepare calves for weaning, through handling practices implemented at processing (branding time) and again when they are preconditioned. To introduce calves to separation from their mothers, he suggested calves be held apart from the cows for one to two hours following processing.

Later on, preconditioning time affords an opportunity to train calves for subsequent processing. Allowing calves to pass through the processing facility on a dry run builds their confidence and minimizes stress as they are brought back through for the real thing. It’s also another opportunity to acclimate to separation from their mothers. Lukasiewicz recommended holding calves separate for 12 to 24 hours before reuniting them with their dams.

Lukasiewicz emphasized that experience at the hands of their handlers affects performance throughout animals’ lives, potentially minimizing or compounding stress and related effects on health and feeding performance. ■

Editor’s Note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.