



# FOLLOW THE LEADER

Moving cattle from the front seems counterintuitive, but is effective.

Story & photos by Troy Smith, field editor

It might not be the way your grandpa did it. It may even seem like a contrarian's approach and counterintuitive to cattle folk accustomed to working a herd from behind. Most people learn to get behind the herd and drive animals from one place to another. If that's all they've ever known, it might be hard to wrap their minds around the concept of moving cattle by "leading" from the front of the herd.

Don't misunderstand. We're not talking about using feed incentives to lure cattle into following a handler. Some people do move gentle cattle that way, by coaxing them along with a bucket of grain, a sack of range cubes or a pickup load of good hay. This is different. We're talking about handling cattle in such a way that they perceive the handler as their leader. They will follow the leader, just because they want to follow.

Nebraska-based veterinarian and stockmanship clinician

Tom Noffsinger says this kind of leadership skill is really useful to feedlot personnel. It's a cattle-handling technique that can work particularly well with cattle managed in confinement and periodically moved through alleys and lanes for processing.

The concept of leading cattle is now part of the stockmanship and animal welfare training sessions Noffsinger provides to client feedyards through the services of Production Animal Consultation (PAC). During this spring's PAC

Beef Summit hosted in Kearney, Neb., both Noffsinger and Australian veterinarian and PAC colleague Kev Sullivan talked about the advantages of "leading" cattle.

## Less stress

In tag-team fashion, Noffsinger and Sullivan explained that learning to lead is part of a journey toward more effective stockmanship that enhances worker safety, animal performance and opportunity for increased income on each operation. More

specifically, effective stockmanship minimizes animal stress and its physiological effects, such as stress hormone release, dehydration, and reduced blood levels of glucose and minerals, including calcium, magnesium and potassium — all of which can hinder immune function.

The physical consequences of stress include decreased rumen function and a change in its microbial populations, plus stress-induced behaviors leading to increased incidence of injuries such as toe abscesses, sole abrasions, bumps and bruises.

According to Noffsinger, the fundamentals have not changed. Stockmanship remains a function of successful communication with cattle.

The key to communication is understanding prey animal behavior. A successful handler uses that understanding in the application and release of the pressure of his or her presence — through handler body position, posture and distance from the animals — to direct and control animal movement. A handler applies pressure by moving in and out of the animal's flight zone and across the balance point (the animal's eye, in Noffsinger's opinion) to have the desired influence.

"For a long time, we have talked about the advantage of working cattle from the side, where they can see you and the direction you want them to go at the same time, rather than trying to do it from directly behind them," said Noffsinger. "But there is value in working from the front and being able to draw cattle to you. Actually, you draw the leaders of the herd, and they draw the others."

### All attitude

Noffsinger maintains that all handlers capable of leading cattle share the same necessary attributes. Perhaps most important is their positive attitude. Their approach to handling cattle exhibits humility, respect and honesty, but also an innate curiosity.

Noffsinger says the most successful handlers develop a "presence" to which cattle are almost magnetically drawn. He likens it to the so-called horse-whisperer techniques by which a trainer gets a horse to "hook on." It's what another noted stockmanship clinician, Curt Pate, calls "drawing pressure."

It's not magic. It's not something accomplished only by gifted people. Almost anyone can do it, provided they approach the job with the right state of mind and are willing to spend the time needed to become proficient.

There's the rub. Most feedyard crews are rushed for time, and many are short on experience. They don't spend the time necessary to develop stockmanship



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skills to a higher level. Well, some feedyard crews don't do it, but others make time and realize the benefits.

Queensland-based Kev Sullivan says many Australian feedyards have accomplished handlers capable of leading cattle, rather than driving them. It's a practice they implement with newly arrived calves, as part of the acclimation process.

"We encourage handlers to lead cattle at every opportunity," stated Sullivan as he showed videos of horseback Australian handlers establishing rapport with straight-off-the-truck calves, and then leading the group through drover alleys to a receiving pen.

"One handler can lead a group of calves with no need for anyone to follow behind. The calves learn how to follow their leader as one herd," Sullivan explained, noting how the handler leads the calves around their new pen, showing them to water and to feed in the bunk. The handler then stays with the calves until they have checked out the pen, settled in and are showing signs of contentment.

"Upon arrival, calves are introduced to a leader — someone to say, 'G'day mate. Let me show you around our five-star resort,'" added Sullivan. "The cattle are welcomed and shown where to go by someone they trust, and they gain trust and confidence in their surroundings."

According to Sullivan, properly

acclimated calves will eat more, sooner, and aggressively chew their cud, which releases endorphins and halts the release of stress hormones.

A goal of acclimation is to establish homeostasis of the digestive system and encourage newly arrived cattle to eat and drink. It's critical to achieving optimum immune response from

vaccinations administered at processing.

"We let the cattle tell us when they are ready to be processed. It might be the same day, or the next, or the day after that. It might be a week later, but the cattle tell us when they are ready — having eaten their fill, drunk, and are relaxed and chewing their cud," stated Sullivan.

He said leading cattle is one more facet of stockmanship that can enhance the acclimation process and ultimately improve cattle feeding performance while reducing sickness and the need for treatment.

"A side effect is that stock people (handlers) can get more satisfaction from their work, so there is less employee turnover," Sullivan added. "Your good people get even better, and it takes five-star people to create a five-star resort." |

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

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