

ANGUS

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"The Commercial Cattleman's Angus Connection"

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Subtle Cues to Health

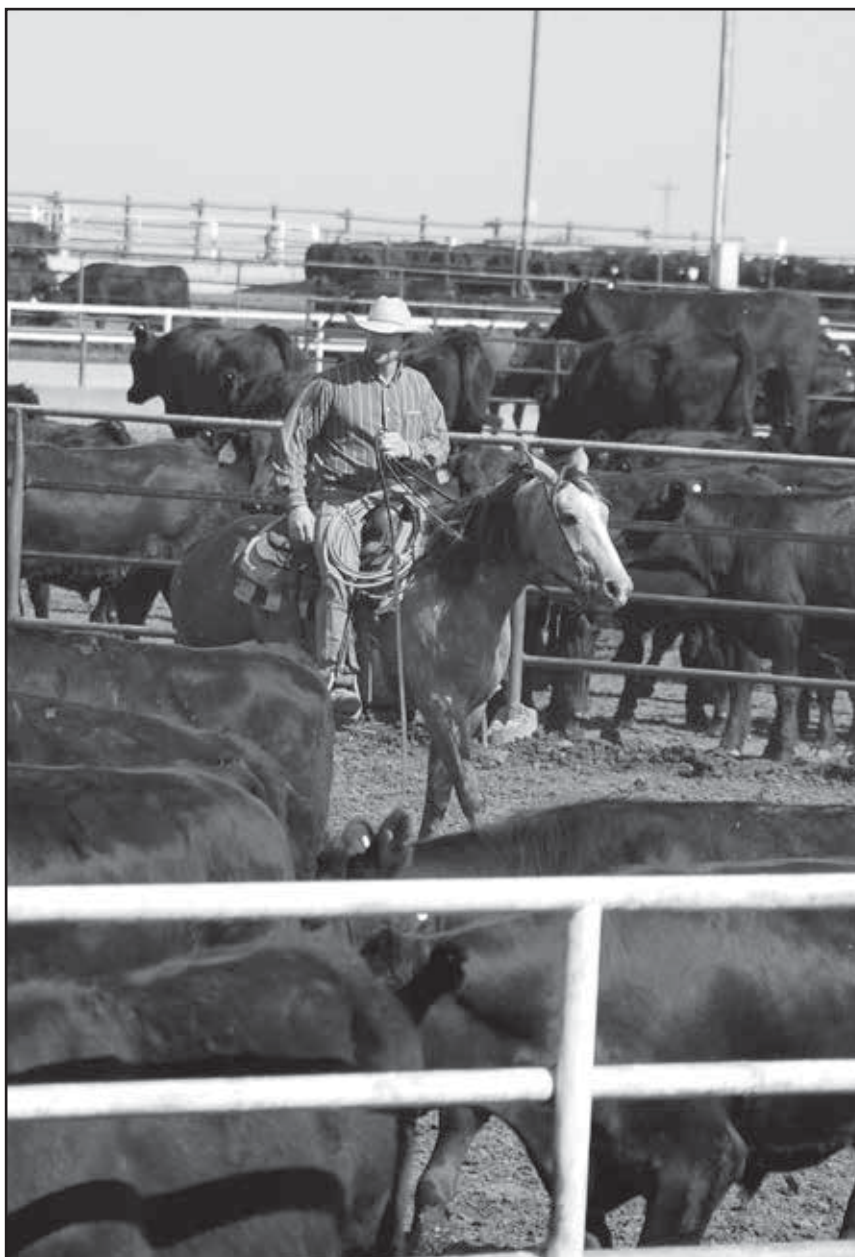
Pen riders read bovine body language to prevent sickness and improve animal well-being. Their skills are valuable throughout the industry.

Story & photos by
TROY SMITH, field editor

Considering the experience, research and applied technology to better manage nutrition, as well as the ever-growing arsenal of products aimed at preventing and treating cattle ailments, it would seem the incidence and severity of disease among feedlot cattle should be in decline. However, cattle still get sick. The feedlot industry must work harder than ever to address challenges feedlot morbidity presents to animal welfare and producer profits. The job of sifting through pens of animals to find and fix the sick ones falls to the feedlot pen rider.

Most pen riders are of the cowboy persuasion. Many are accomplished horsemen or horsewomen. Arguably more valuable than horsemanship, however, is stockmanship — the ability to savvy the bovine, as well as the equine. Pen riders must be able to "read" cattle in order to detect illness early. They must make on-the-spot diagnoses and initiate appropriate and timely treatments.

The pen-riding profession attracts people looking for a cowboy kind of job, but not all of them stick with it. Seldom is money a big incentive, for pen-rider wages typically lag behind those paid to other people whose jobs require such specialized skills. That's the opinion of veterinarian Wade Taylor. The Oakley, Kan., practitioner is a partner in Production Animal Consultation (PAC), a team of clinicians and consultants serving feedlots. PAC partners have worked with plenty of pen riders, and



Pen riders can't control the kind or quality of cattle placed in their charge, nor can they control the weather. They can control their response, says Oakley, Kan., veterinarian Wade Taylor, including when and how they will apply that essential skill of focused observation.

Taylor thinks the best of the bunch do it because they are true animal advocates.

"It takes a special kind of person to be really good at the job. They have to want to take care of animals. The good ones have great observational skill," says Taylor. "Great pen riders spot the animals that aren't satisfied and try to figure out why. Rather than just

finding sick cattle, they try to keep cattle healthy."

Risk factors

According to Taylor, one likely reason why feedlot morbidity rates remain high is because many cattle are placed in

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Subtle Cues to Health *(from cover)*

confinement at younger ages and lighter weights than they once were. They are also fed for longer periods of time.

“Thirty years ago, a majority of cattle came to the feedlot weighing 750 pounds (lb.) or more and were fed for about 120 days. Now, they may come weighing 400 pounds and be fed for 200 to 250 days. Respiratory disease becomes a bigger problem as days on feed increase, because the period of exposure is longer,” explains Taylor.

“Average daily gains are greater now, and conversion rates have improved. We expect more of cattle on feed,” he adds. “But high-concentrate diets accelerate animal metabolism, and I don’t think we really know what we’re doing to their immune systems.”

Other factors that can increase the risk of sickness in the feedlot include commingling of calves prior to arrival, long hauls and high levels of shrink. Opportunity for exposure to infections is greater among put-together groups of cattle. All of those factors contribute to stress, which can inhibit immune function.

Also influencing whether animals are at high or low risk of infection is their health history, including preweaning disease challenges and which, when and if vaccinations were administered. Of course, there’s stress caused by changes in the weather.

Pen riders can’t control the kind or quality of cattle placed in their charge, nor can they control the weather. According to Taylor, they can control their response, including when and how they will apply that essential skill of focused observation. It’s a skill best honed by experience.

“There’s probably less-experienced help available than ever before,” opines Taylor. “It used to be that pen riders were mostly ranch-raised. Today, more people come to the feedlot without that kind of background. There are fewer applicants that have much experience as cattle caregivers, and training programs probably aren’t as good as they need to be. We have high expectations for an often poorly trained workforce.”

Taylor believes the industry’s expectations could be better met if the more inexperienced workers received training in basic animal husbandry. Even veteran pen riders may become more effective after advanced training, particularly in the application of low-stress handling

techniques. The veteran’s ego may sometimes pose a challenge, but real stockmen get over it and realize there is always more to be learned. Management needs to understand the concepts, too.

The basics

Fundamentals that can’t be overemphasized include timing of various pen-rider duties. Many feedlots assign processing of incoming cattle to the cowboy crew, and timing can influence how readily cattle settle into the new environment, as well as their health status throughout the feeding period. The type of cattle and their history matter, but Taylor offers this general rule-of-thumb.

“We typically recommend waiting to process calves until 24 to 48 hours after arrival,” he advises. “It’s usually less important for yearlings with a good health history, but there’s a real benefit to calves when they are allowed time to eat, drink, lay down and rest before they are processed.”

Evaluation of cattle in a feeding pen starts before a pen rider enters. Taylor recommends observation from a distance first, before the pen rider’s presence inside influences their behavior. Prey animals by nature, cattle may hide symptoms of weakness in the presence of a perceived predator.

Once inside the pen, Taylor suggests riders assume a nonthreatening posture. “Move in easily, and move through the animals slowly. Get all of the cattle up and see them move. Be focused, but relaxed. Avoid sudden movements or anything that could transfer tension to the cattle,” says Taylor.

“Look to the corners of the pen, areas around waterers and near ends of bunk lines. Do any animals stick out as different from the rest? Look at those cattle more closely,” Taylor advises. “Why do they look different? ... Do they appear depressed? How’s their fill? Are they gaunt? What do their feces look like? How do they travel? Are there signs of lameness, a digestive disorder or respiratory problem?”

It’s also important to observe how the cattle are breathing. More obvious signs of respiratory distress would include a stance with the back arched and head down, in an effort to open air passages. More subtle signs include short, shallow breaths, flared nostrils and extra effort required

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“Day-in and day-out, the most important thing for pen riders to look for is whether cattle are eating, drinking and resting. Are they satisfied? If not, we need to figure out why.”

— *Wade Taylor*



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3201 Frederick Ave. • Saint Joseph, MO 64506-2997
phone: 816-383-5200 • fax: 816-233-6575
office hours: (M-F) 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. (Central time)
web site: www.angusbeefbulletin.com

Staff are listed by name, phone extension and e-mail prefix. All direct phone numbers are “816-383-5...”; all e-mail addresses are “...@angusjournal.com”

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Field editors

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Subtle Cues to Health *(from page 2)*

to exhale. Eye and nose discharge is often associated with respiratory infection, but discharge can just be a result of a change in the weather.

According to Taylor, the ideal time to evaluate cattle would be each time feed is delivered and cattle come to the bunk. Animals uninterested in eating are generally easy to spot. More often, however, pens are ridden after cattle have been fed and had time to eat. Consequently, it's particularly important to evaluate fill and note animals that look like they haven't eaten.

To beat the heat during summer, Taylor advises pen riders to start checking pens at sunrise. During hot weather, open-mouthed breathing brought on by heat can confuse detection of respiratory disease. During the cold of winter, it can be beneficial to delay evaluation until the sun is up longer. Cattle might even need to be moved around, to give them a little exercise and stimulate the cough reflex, so they will better demonstrate their current health status.

"Day-in and day-out, the most important thing for pen riders to look for is whether cattle are eating, drinking and resting. Are they satisfied? If not, we need to figure out why. Sometimes they just need more acclimation," says Taylor.

Preventing disease by reducing stress

Helping pen riders better acclimate cattle to the feedlot environment is a

specialty of Kip Lukasiewicz, who bases his veterinary practice in Ainsworth, Neb. A PAC partner and the Academy of Veterinary Consultants' 2012 Consultant of the Year, Lukasiewicz says proper acclimation is just part of a low-stress cattle-handling mind-set.

"So much of managing sickness is prevention through reduced stress. Better health and improved performance will come from applying low-stress stockmanship," he insists. "For the feedlot, it starts with helping cattle become accustomed to their new environment."

Acclimation starts with fairly simple things, like having good hay and fresh water already present in receiving pens when cattle arrive. Lukasiewicz also advises pen riders to start working with newly arrived cattle. He recommends starting as soon as cattle have had a chance to eat, drink and rest, but before processing.

"It pays to give cattle some lessons, so they accept the presence of handlers and start learning to trust them. Cattle also start learning to move and go where the handlers want them to go," says Lukasiewicz. "We're only asking for a 10-minute lesson where the pen rider sends the cattle to a corner of the pen, sends them to another corner and then opens the gate and sends them through it. A couple of sessions like that, during the first 24 hours, can do a lot of good, but even once is better than not at all."

Lukasiewicz believes cattle-handling



Once inside the pen, Taylor suggests riders assume a nonthreatening posture.

methods need to improve across industry segments, and cattle would be better prepared if their training started before they reach the feedlot. He's certain all segments would benefit long-term if low-stress handling techniques were applied to lessons delivered at the ranch level and during backgrounding, too. Reducing stress all along the production chain would enhance cattle well-being, as well as the producer's bottom line. Not all producers and pen riders are quick to accept such notions.

"It takes a leader, and management has to be on board. The feedlot managers we work with are receptive to the

stockmanship concepts we're talking about," says Lukasiewicz. "Many pen riders are, too. Generally, the skeptics come around once they see them work and realize the benefits of better stockmanship."

Lukasiewicz says feedlot managers and pen riders have become an important resource for PAC consultants, and lessons learned from their experience can be shared with other clients. It helps everyone achieve high expectations.



Editor's Note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman based at Sargent, Neb.