

# Handle with Care



Cows handle better when approached from the side or front.

## Handling techniques can lower stress for man and beast.

Story & photos by  
**ED HAAG**

Jason Cleere notes that while dealing with nutritional stress is often one of the biggest challenges for beef producers (see page 76), reducing stress associated with handling can involve little more than behavior modification on the part of the handlers.

“You can immediately reduce the stress level when handling cattle by cutting out the noise of whips, dogs and shouting,” says Cleere, Extension beef cattle specialist for Texas AgriLife Extension.

“That also means letting the guys helping you know that it isn’t OK to hot-shot every calf or cow that comes down the chute.”

His recommendation is to leave the cowboy testosterone back in the pickup and apply some common sense to the handling process.

“My number one piece of advice for reducing handling stress is take your time,” he says. “The more you push it the more likely it is that a cow or you will end up in a wreck.”

As a cattle handling presenter on the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) Stockmanship & Stewardship Tour, Ron Gill has conducted hands-on training sessions at livestock auctions in 20 states and 35 towns.

These sessions involved sharing proven low-stress cattle handling principles that are directly applicable to gathering, penning, chute work and hauling.

Instead of creating a high-stress environment by using force and overt intimidation to drive cattle from one point to the next, Gill uses body position and deliberate movements to direct the animals to the desired location.

Extension livestock specialist at Texas A&M University, Gill notes that his actions are all based on four proven observations:

1. Cattle are most comfortable when they can see you.
2. When someone or something enters their flight zone, their first

response is to try to go around you so they can keep you directly in their line of sight.

3. When approached individually they will always try to move to the herd.

4. Cattle are capable of processing only one stimulus at a time.

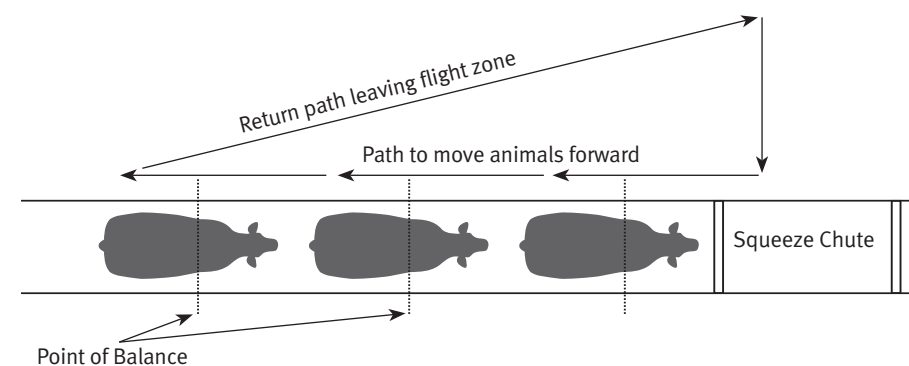
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— *Jason Cleere*

### Cow psychology 101

To Gill, each one of his four observations offers a knowledgeable stockman the opportunity to influence, in a low-stress environment, the movement of one or more cattle. For example, because cattle are most comfortable when they have the individual approaching in clear sight, they will avoid allowing that person to enter their blind spot directly in front or behind by moving in the opposite

**Fig. 1: Cattle movement through crowding alley and squeeze chute**



direction. Similarly, knowing that a cow wants to go around you and will join other cattle when possible provides that person with the information needed to use his or her body position to successfully manipulate that cow's movements.

Finally, understanding that cattle are capable of processing only one stimulus at a time forces the handler to slow down in order to give the cow time to comprehend the action and respond accordingly.

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Gill is of the opinion that those who try to rush cattle will only create problems for themselves and the livestock. In order to successfully implement a low-stress control regimen, one must take the time to identify an animal's flight zone.

The flight zone is the animal's personal space. Its size will depend on how accustomed it is to humans. The tamer the animal, the smaller its flight zone. When the handler is outside the flight zone, the animals will turn and face the handler and maintain their existing distance. When the handler enters the flight zone, the animals will turn away and begin to distance themselves from the handler.

A savvy cattleman must spend enough time to learn his cattle's point of balance. Generally, the point of balance is considered to be near the animal's shoulder, but you will discover that the cow's eye really serves as the point of balance. To improve handling, you need to work to make the point of balance further forward than the shoulder, particularly for sorting purposes. A stockman can prompt forward movement by standing behind a cow's point of balance or backward movement by standing in front of the cow's point of balance.

Because cattle function as a herd when faced with an atypical situation, the same principles used to control a single animal also can be used to control a herd.

Once the handler has determined the flight zone and point of balance of an individual animal or herd, a plan can be devised to move the respective animals to the desired location. That plan should involve using the handler's presence in a specific location to exert enough pressure on the cattle to motivate them to move in the preferred direction. (See

"Under Pressure," pages 160-162 in the October 2005 *Angus Journal* or through the Back Issue Search available at [www.angusjournal.com](http://www.angusjournal.com).)

It should be understood that all animals respond differently to pressure, Gill says, and being able to read cattle and anticipate their response before applying the pressure is an integral part of low-stress cattle handling.

Gill adds that when considering a plan of action, one should always keep in mind that it is easier to work from the front, drawing the cattle to and around you. Enough space should be left to prevent cattle from balking as they pass the handler. If cattle are comfortable coming by you, sorting in an alley or out of a gate becomes very easy.

Working cattle from behind is a

stockman's least-effective strategy and should only be used as a last resort.

For a 10-minute video demonstrating some of Gill's low-pressure cattle handling techniques, refer to [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gycWs6q1GB](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gycWs6q1GB). A paper is available at <http://animalscience.tamu.edu/images/pdf/beef/cattle-handling-pointers.pdf>.

