

Follow Their Nose & Other Stockmanship Tips

Curt Pate shares his tried and true tactics.

Story by
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When it comes to working with cattle, Curt Pate says a common mistake he sees is when people walk behind the animal (or the herd) and try to push them forward.

Pate, a renowned horse trainer and stockman who also ranches near Newell, S.D., blames society for this approach.

“Society makes people get in line,” he explains. “It’s programmed into our brains to get in the back of the line and then move forward. So, when we work livestock, we do the exact same thing.”

Once you recognize that cattle’s range of vision is different than humans, you will quickly realize that walking behind the animal is the wrong approach, says Pate.

He explains that because animals’ eyes are on the side of their head, they can see a wide area — almost 360° when their head is down for grazing — but, their vision is not very precise. As a result, when a person approaches, the animal will turn its head to look.

Says Pate, “As you come up to the center of the animal’s eye, you are more in focus to them. But when the animal turns its head, it also must change its direction.”

Thus, Pate’s rule for handling cattle is to place yourself where the animal can always see you.

“I don’t try to work the whole animal; I try to work the animal’s nose,” he says, explaining that where the animal’s nose points toward, the rest of the body usually follows.

“If you can always see that nose, the animal can see you.”

Pate likes to work at a 45° angle from the front of the animal. He calls this the focus point (another industry term is balance point), saying, “That’s when they start listening to you.” For each animal and depending on the environment, the focus point can be different.

He gives the example of sorting cattle, and explains, once the animal

sees you with both eyes, as you step forward, the animal will begin to move. If you step back, they’ll stop. Or, if you move out of their focus point and they must turn their head to see you better, they will turn away.

Pate adds, “If the animal starts to move the wrong way, you must stop and step back and start over. Then move forward where she can see you better.”

As the animal begins to move forward in the desired direction, walk with them, says Pate, but not from behind. Instead, walk along their side in a

zigzag pattern like a border collie.

If the animal is not moving in the right direction, he reiterates, “Always be willing to stop and start again.”

Thinking vs. surviving

Pate has spent decades working with and studying horses and cattle. Today, he continues to ranch, but also travels the country teaching other producers about stockmanship and

low-stress livestock handling. He works with 100,000-head feedyards and auction barns to ranches of all sizes.

Pate has also earned acclaim as a top-notch horse clinician and trainer, but he offers this clarification, saying, “Everyone thinks I’m a horse guy, but I’m a cattle guy who uses horses.”

He explains that when you are working with an animal, you are working with their brain. He describes the animal’s brain as having two sides: a thinking side and a surviving — or reaction — side.

“Animals use the thinking side in instances like grazing. They are deciding what to do and what to eat,” says Pate.

Conversely, he describes the survival mode as an animal in panic — something really scares them. Signs include the head of the animal rising up, their eyes widening, their tail raising and they are looking to get away.

“In survival mode, they are not thinking, they are reacting. If animals are in survival mode too long and stressed so much, their immune system can shut down,” says Pate.

Recognizing this, Pate says that the first lesson a good stockman learns is to never stress an animal to the point of shifting them into survival mode.

“If an animal does reach that point, you’ve got to back the pressure off,” Pate says.

Animals have an incredible memory, he points out. “We’ve got to remember, any negative things we do to animals, they never want to get in that situation again.”

He counts sound as a negative experience that can stress animals. Bull whips and rabble paddles create distrust, Pate says.

Pate acknowledges that stockmanship skills are honed through trial and error. To that end he suggests to other stockmen, “When you get done working cattle, take time to analyze what you did well and what you did wrong. Then, next time, don’t make that mistake again.”

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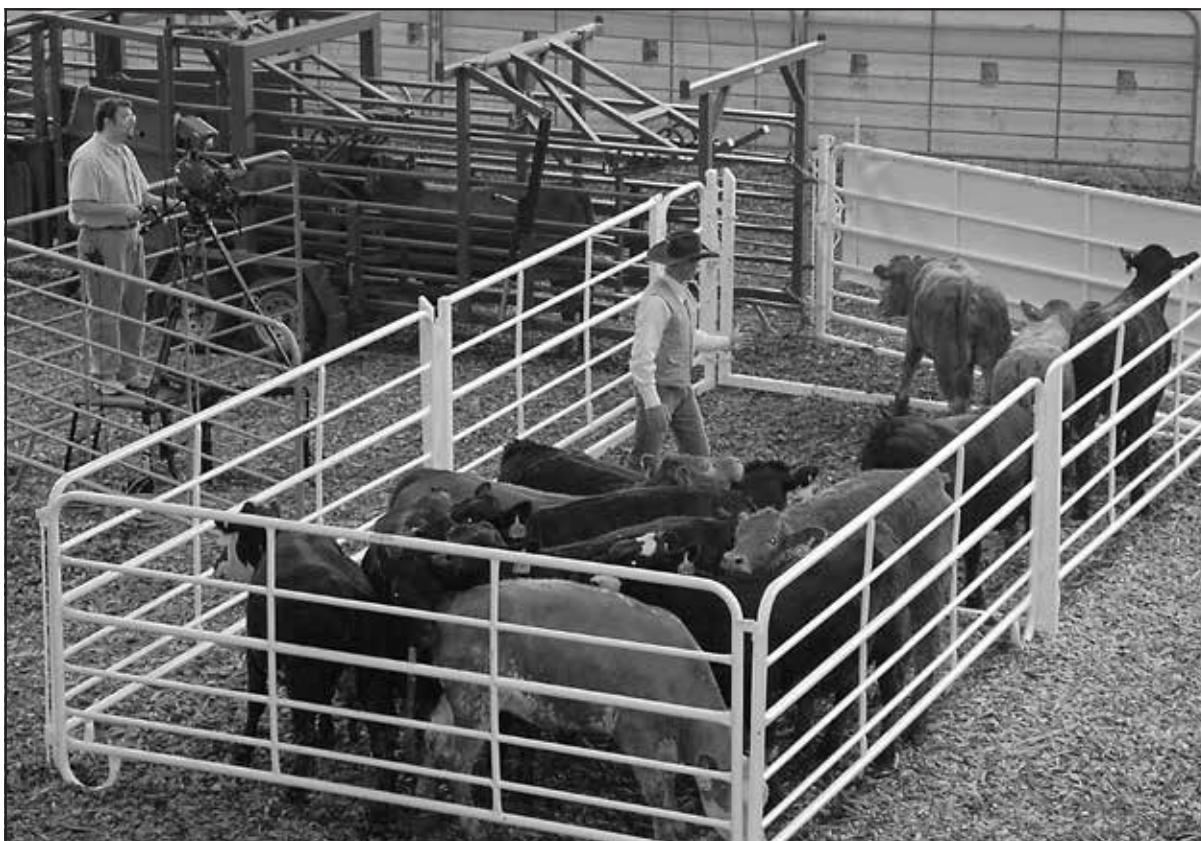


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Editor’s Note: Kindra Gordon is a cattlemaster and freelancer from Whitewood, S.D.