

Stockmanship

By Bud Williams

My method of working livestock consists of learning to “read” what the animal is telling you and change position so that she wants to go where you want her to go. It is important that the animals do not consider you a threat to them. People have written articles about my Stockmanship methods, but if they use the predator/prey examples you can be sure that they do not understand the concept at all. The last thing I want my animals to do is to think of me as a predator. My goal is not only to work livestock with very little stress but also to take existing stress off of them. By handling the animals this way, you will be able to get the job done more quickly, efficiently and with less cost than by the traditional methods. Some of the other by-products are increased performance and reduced health problems in the animals, as well as still being on speaking terms with the family after a day of working livestock together. Do not make the mistake of thinking that I “baby” animals. I probably pressure livestock more than most people. The difference is that I pressure them how and where they want to be pressured.

Your proper positioning and pressure application when moving cattle, sheep and other livestock is what makes them feel comfortable and willing to stay where you put them on the range. This same thing is what makes feedlot cattle gain better with less health problems or increase a dairy herd’s production. It is what makes a cow perceive you as a non-enemy so she isn’t “on the fight” if you need to handle her baby calf, or get overly upset when you wean. In other words, the techniques are the same when you are working any kind of livestock. An elk or bison (or wild cow) will tell you that you are “close enough” when you are further away from her than you would be from a gentle cow or sheep, but she is telling you the same thing if you will only see it.

In order for you to learn to work livestock the way that I do, you must first change your attitude. This will probably be the most difficult thing I will ask you to do.

OLD – I’m going to “MAKE” that animal do what I want

NEW – I’m going to “LET” that animal do what I want

OLD – That stupid (#%\$&, miserable, ornery, wild, hateful...) cow (calf, bull, sheep, pig, goat, horse...) broke back (went the wrong way, missed the gate, charged me, got sick, died...)

NEW – What did I do to cause the animal to react that way?

The control we can have over animals is amazing. Thirty years ago I was considered pretty good at handling problem livestock. Knowing what I do today I wonder how I even held down a job. To me, the exciting thing is knowing that I have only scratched the surface. I am learning and improving every day. You can too.

When trying to control animals the old way, you are giving up any chance of getting the kind of control I am talking about. Forget all of your excuses:

She is afraid of the gate.

She remembers getting hurt in the chute.

She has never been through the chute before.

Etc., etc., etc.

Believe that she is responding to what you are doing right at this moment.

I would like to talk to you about some of the things I have learned about handling livestock. The methods I use have proven themselves with reindeer, elk, buffalo, camels, fallow deer, horses, hogs, sheep, goats and poultry, as well as with beef and dairy cattle. While my method of stockmanship is quite simple, it is very difficult for people to learn because it often goes against human behavior. Remember, as a stockman, you are supposed to be the smart one. It is up to you to change to accommodate the animal.

I have had the good fortune to observe people working livestock from northern Alaska and Canada to Central America, from Oregon and California in the west to Kentucky in the east. Everyone used the same basic principle. That is, to go out and chase the animals from where they were, to where the people wanted them to go. By now, you probably realize that I don't think that is the best way to work animals. The traditional method of driving livestock consists of trying to frighten the animal away from the person, hopefully in the direction the person wants it to go. Using fear and force to move the animals is very stressful to them. My method takes the animal's natural behavior into consideration, but makes us change our natural behavior.

There are certain things animals want to do as long as they are in a normal mental state.

1. *They want to see what is pressuring them.*
2. *They want to move in the direction they are headed. This may seem obvious to you, but if this is the case, why would you move behind an animal to make it go when moving into the animal's blind spot will cause it to turn to see you?*
3. *They want to follow other animals.*
4. *They have very little patience.*

Proper position on your part and nothing more is enough pressure to allow you to move livestock any place they are physically able to go. By you being in the position, the animals will want to move in the desired direction. Excessive pressure will put the animals into a panic condition where none of these things apply.

Loud noise that is directed to the animal is almost always excessive pressure, especially yelling, revving the motor on you 4-wheeler, etc. it is not only stressful to the animals, but it is detrimental to your objective. They are quite willing to accept general noise such as banging chutes and normal motor sounds.

As pressure is applied to move the animals, some of it must be released when they move. Either by you stepping back, or by the fact that they moved ahead and that takes some of the pressure off. Do not lose contact with the animal by releasing all of the pressure. However, constant pressure with no let up, or excessive pressure is what panics animals.

Do not apply pressure from behind an animal. Now listen to what I said. **“Do not APPLY PRESSURE from behind.”** You can walk along behind livestock all day and not cause a problem as long as you aren't pressuring them. There is always a correct position. This spot moves as the animal moves. The angle you move in relation to the animal determines if you will maintain the proper position. The speed you move is important, but not as important as the angle.

Read your animals. They will tell you what your position should be. Don't try to anticipate what the animals will do as this will put you out of position and likely cause the very thing that you are trying to prevent.

“Whatever you anticipate, you will create”

Moving back and forth while getting closer to the animals will tend to cause them to move away from you.

Moving parallel to livestock in the same direction the animals are going will tend to slow the animals down. This is true if you are at the front, the side or behind the herd. This is very helpful if you are trying to settle animals that have too much movement. It is very detrimental if you are driving a herd since you tend to kill the movement that you are trying to generate.

Moving parallel to the livestock in the opposite direction (front to rear) will tend to speed them up. Animals want to continue in the direction they are headed. When they see you coming, they will try to hurry past you.

I am not a good enough writer to be able to write a “How To” book. The video that Eunice and I have for sale of my presentation at the 1990 Stockman Grass Farmer Grazing Conference is quite complete as far as teaching my Stockmanship methods though it is far from being a professional product. However, at this time it is the only thing available that documents my stock handling principles.

If you have watched our video or attended one of our schools....

If you have truly changed your basic attitude about livestock as I have suggested....

If you will look at your animals to see if your position is right or wrong....

If you will take responsibility for what the animal does....

Then you will be able to continue learning on your own.

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