

Working cattle and cattle behavior

by Marty Marten

There are many similarities between handling cattle and working with a horse in the round pen. In addition to understanding bovine behavior to successfully handle cattle quietly and calmly, we need to learn positioning, and develop feel, timing and balance.

One goal of my cow-working clinics is to help people gain a better understanding of cattle behavior; how to read a cow and think like a cow in ranch-handling situations.

Cattle have a flight zone (see Diagram 1). This is their personal space. When we want them to move, all we have to do is penetrate their flight zone. When they move, if we retreat from their flight zone, we have rewarded this behavior through *release of pressure*. By alternately entering and retreating from their flight zone (i.e. by riding at the edge of the flight zone), we encourage continued movement. To move an animal forward, approach behind the point of balance as shown in Diagram 1.

If you study cattle to see what they do before they move, you will get a better feel for their flight zone. For example, a cow will generally lower its head before it turns and moves away. Flight-zone size changes in different situations. Their flight zone is generally larger when we approach head-on and smaller when we approach from behind their balance point or when they walk past a rider. Each cow's flight zone is different, since some cattle genetically are more docile than others. Further, excited cattle have a larger flight zone than calm cattle. Some cattle, not familiar with people afoot, may have a larger flight zone with a person afoot than with a person approaching on horseback.

Cattle have long memories, just like horses. Previous handling experiences will affect how easy or difficult cattle are to handle. Cattle need to learn in a nonstressful manner that you control their movement and they cannot escape.

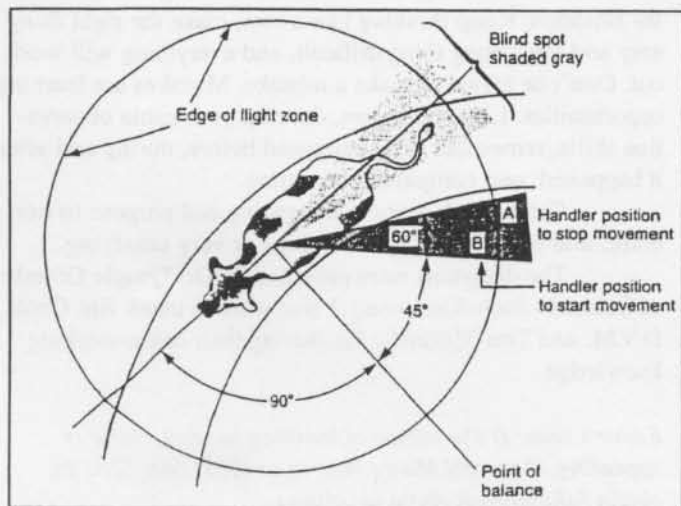


Diagram 1. Cattle flight zone and range of vision.

Like horses, cattle have wide-angle vision and a blind spot directly behind them. If you get behind cattle to drive them, you will be in their blind spot.

This causes them to want to turn around to see where you are, or if they are scared, to scatter.

By using the A and B positions in Diagram 1, you can initiate and control movement simultaneously. This is why getting a cow good at changing eyes helps get them better to drive.

When moving a group of cattle, it is very important to understand how cattle position themselves within the herd. First, during movement, cattle maintain visual contact by staying in the A and B positions in Diagram 1. Second, the social dynamics of cattle establishes a filing order. The leaders will be in the front of the herd, the dominants are in the middle, and the submissive and weaker animals will be at the rear. This is why trying to drive a herd from directly behind is difficult. You would be trying to drive the submissive cattle into the dominants.

Bud Williams, well known for his knowledge of herding techniques, emphasizes avoiding two bad habits. First, don't chase cattle from the rear and second, don't yell and holler at them. Instead, concentrate on moving the herd leaders and keep things quiet, relaxed and at a walk.

Diagram 2 indicates rider position to keep a herd moving. A herd has a collective flight zone as though it is one animal. Approach from the side at an angle to keep the herd moving. When you ride alongside the herd, if you move directly parallel rather than as shown in Diagram 2, you will tend to split the herd. This applies in an open pasture as well as along a fence.

When moving pairs, if you exert pressure from behind, cows and calves will separate: calves fall behind, cows become agitated, and now you have a mess. Before you start a herd of pairs moving, be sure they are mothered up. Trailing pairs (keep the herd strung out in tandem file where possible) is an effective way to keep them mothered up during movement.

Diagram 3 shows gathering stragglers. The tendency is to lope out and around to chase stragglers back into the

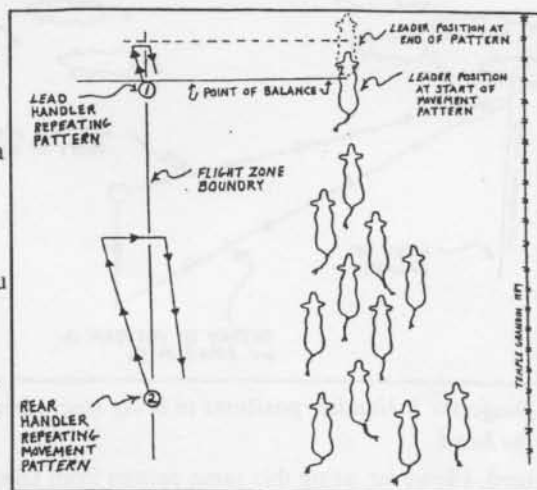


Diagram 2. Handler positions to move groups of cattle on pasture.



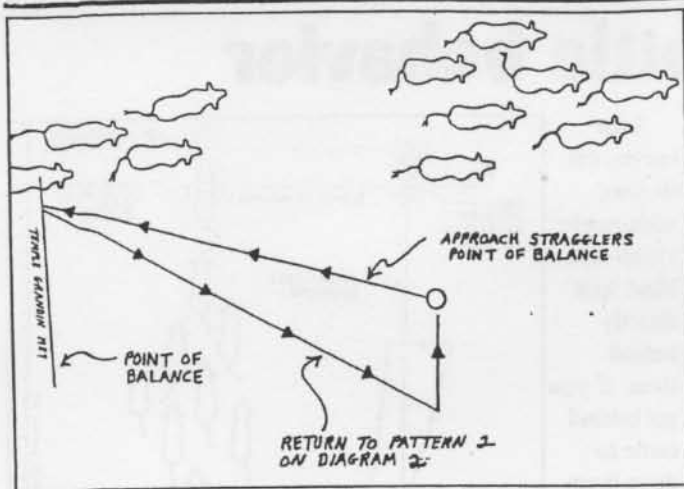


Diagram 3. Handler positions to bring stragglers back into the herd.

herd. However, using this same pattern from Diagram 2 takes advantage of the herd-following instinct of cattle. Movement attracts movement. This following instinct helps keep cattle at the rear moving with the herd even without a rider pushing from behind.

When moving a herd into a corral, it is easier if you keep them strung out and don't let them gather and crowd at the gate. See Diagram 4. Positioning a rider at the gate, moving forward and backward keeps the cattle moving orderly into a corral. This is also how you would count cattle into a corral. Allow the herd to move from the pasture toward the gate in their natural order and not crowd them. The leaders' movement through the gate will help draw the others into the corral. However, as the herd approaches the gate, if all the riders get behind the cattle to push them through, the cattle will bunch up and mill around. Getting them through the gate will become stressful for the cattle. The same cattle would then be more difficult to put through a gate next time.

Moving cattle out of a corral, sorting and/or counting cattle out is shown in Diagram 5. I have also used this method to count cattle out of a roe deer. It is important to move cattle out of the corral quietly, not allowing them to race out.

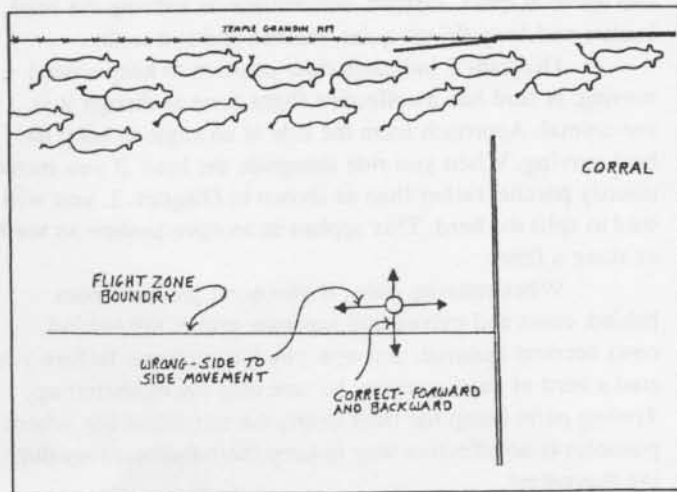


Diagram 4. Leader handler position for filling corral.

To start cattle moving, put pressure on them away from the gate direction instead of toward the gate. This way the gate is the path of least resistance. Again, the tendency is to get behind cattle and push them toward the gate. In doing so, moving toward the gate is not as comfortable, since cattle do not always perceive an outlet. Rather, put pressure on cattle away from the gate (arrow A). Take the pressure off and reposition (arrow B). Positioning a rider at the gate keeps cattle moving out of the corral in a quiet, calm, orderly manner. This also helps keep pairs mothered up as they leave.

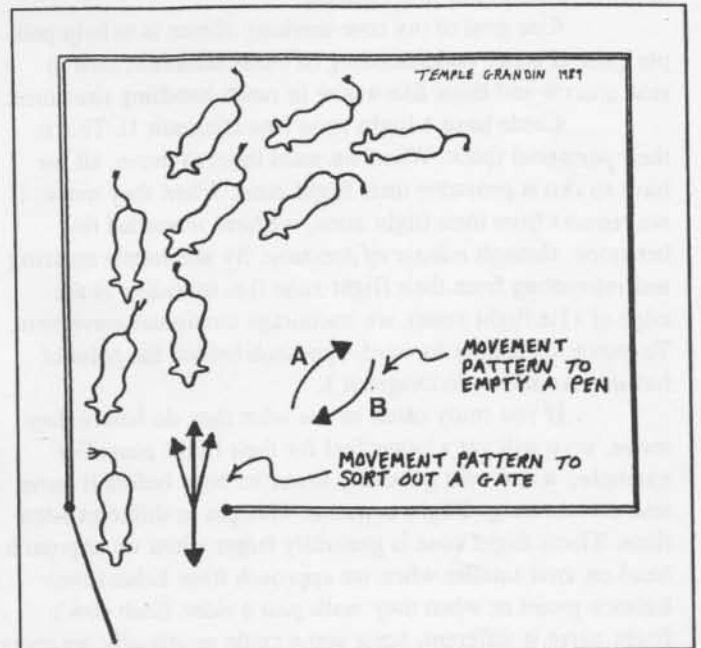


Diagram 5. Handler positions for emptying a pen and sorting at a gate.

Cattle always remember the direction they came into the corral, so moving them back out the same direction they came in will be easier. When it is necessary to separate pairs for working, it is easier to pull the cows off and leave the calves by sorting the cows back out the gate they came in.

These are just some general guidelines about cattle behavior and handling. Like horses, be willing to *adjust to fit the situation*. Keep thinking like a cow, make the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult, and everything will work out. Don't be afraid to make a mistake. Mistakes are learning opportunities. Like the horses, develop your cattle observation skills, remember what happened before, during and after it happened, and compare to next time.

Cattle work gives real meaning and purpose to our horse, and doing a real job horseback is very satisfying.

The diagrams were provided by Dr. Temple Grandin of Colorado State University. I also want to thank Jim Cook, D.V.M. and Tim McGaffic for sharing their cattle-working knowledge.

Editor's note: If the notion of learning to work cattle is appealing, then call Marty Marten at (303) 665-5281 to obtain information about his clinics.

