The Weaning/Receiving Solution

I was born and raised in the western Canadian farm and ranch community of Marwayne, Alberta. My family owned and operated a cow/calf operation which consisted of about 800 acres of farm land and 4500 acres of government grazing lease. I thrived in the ranch environment and spent every minute I could outside helping my dad with the livestock. My uncle, Vern Franklin, was a PRCA rodeo stock contractor and my dad and I spent a lot of time at the Franklin ranch, gathering horses and bulls and just enjoying the old time cowboy culture. I was one of those very fortunate children who grew up with adults who believed that kids should be a part of the day to day work on a ranch. There was never a job too difficult for them to take me along.

After graduating from high school I attended the University of Alberta for one year and hated every minute of it. My mind constantly drifted back to the ranch; the cows, the horses, and my family. I decided not to return to university and spent the next four years working at various jobs until finally deciding to pursue a career in law enforcement. I applied to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, wrote my entrance exams, and went through the interviews. I was told that there was a three to five year waiting list and that I should just wait for the call. I was disappointed at the time, but looking back I now know that fate was smiling on me that day. I was about to make a decision that would change my life completely.

I left my meeting with the recruiting officers in a bit of a daze; what was I going to do for three years while I waited for my call? I decided to stop and visit my grandmother to get some advice. She was not too thrilled with my decision to go into the police force in the first place and she took advantage of an opportunity make a point. She looked at me and said "Dawn, you know that the only time you are really happy is when you're staring at a cows' rear end". I left her house that day and immediately enrolled at a local agriculture college and proceeded to complete a two-year program in Animal Science.

After graduating from college I got a job at a local feedlot and knew from day one that I was finally back in my element. It was while working at this feedlot that I was able to meet Bud Williams. I had no idea how that meeting would change my life forever. Bud had come to Canada to do an HRM cattle-handling demonstration. I was completely stunned by what he was able to do with animals. I was head of the health crew at the feedlot, and when my boss asked me how I would feel about having Bud spend some time with our crew I was more than just a little bit enthusiastic! Well, a little bit of time turned into eleven years. He became my mentor; and like my dad, never refused to take me along no matter how difficult the job was. I will always be grateful to him for that because I know it would have been easier for him to do it on his own. He is truly a remarkable man who operates at a level of genius that I have never witnessed before. It would be impossible to describe all that I have learned from him...not just about cattle, but about life. I am very proud to call Bud and Eunice my mentors and consider them family in every sense of the word.

After Bud and Eunice left Canada and returned to the U.S. I came to visit them at their new home at the Addison Ranch in Bowie, Texas. To make a long story short, Mr. Addison offered me a job and I accepted. I have been the livestock manager at the ranch for the past three years and continue to see Bud and Eunice on a regular basis. They have been encouraging me to share what I have learned from them, and I feel like it is my responsibility to do what I can to help bring their revolutionary approach to livestock handling to other interested ranchers. In a life that has been marked by good fortune, I am especially aware of the remarkable opportunity I had in being able to work with Bud on a daily basis. I was one of very few who were offered that opportunity. The only way I can thank them is to try to help other people learn what I have learned...because, at the end of the day, helping other people is what the ranching culture is all about...and it is certainly what Bud and Eunice are all about!

OUTLINE OF PRESENTATION

1. General Behavior
   a) What they see
   b) Why they react the way they do

2. Receiving/Weaning Calves
   a) Preparing for weaning
   b) Settling new cattle
   c) Getting them "on feed"

Weaning Doesn't Have To Be Wearing

By Ellen Humphries

Weaning day doesn't have to be the defining moment of the cattle herd. "It shouldn't be a terrible, stressful thing for the calves or the owners," says Dawn Hnatow, who will teach low-stress handling techniques at the 2006 School for Successful Ranching, March 25-26, in San Antonio.

"Weaning is just one part of the whole life of that herd," she says, regardless of the weaning technique you choose.

Hnatow, originally from Canada, spent nearly a dozen years working with the well-known stockmanship leader Bud Williams, and studying his methods.

"Bud came to work at a feedlot where I was working in Canada. That's where I spent the majority of time working with him, 10 or 11 years, I guess, in the feedlot. Then when I moved to Texas, I worked with him for a year on this ranch," she says of Jerry Addison's ranch at Bowie, where she continues to operate and offer consulting help to other ranchers.

"Yes, he's very intense, but I feel very fortunate to be one of few people who did get to actually work with him in the field and see how he implements all these things," she says of her mentor.

Hnatow grew up on her family's grain and livestock operation. She truly saw all sides of agriculture since her uncle was a rodeo stock contractor. "I have a colorful background in agriculture," she says laughing at some interesting memories. "When you are selecting specifically for bad disposition (in livestock), things can sort of take a turn south every now and then."

She earned a degree in animal science, "but I can tell you that I learned more from Bud about animals in a month than I learned the entire time I was in college. By that I mean practical things that I could use when I went home to my dad's ranch, when I went to help my neighbors and friends and in my job."

Sensible, yet backwards

Stockmanship can be difficult to learn from a book. One of the best ways to learn the techniques is to watch them being used. Even so, Hnatow points out that watching and doing are two entirely different things.

"The techniques are very sensible," she says, "but they are completely backward to our instincts. That's the wall people crash into, I think. They can look from the outside and watch someone else do it and say, 'Hey yeah, that looks really good and that went very well.'" But to step past watching and to achieve the desired result in animal movement can be the difficult step for people.

To get her students and clients to alter their thinking about stockmanship techniques, she first explains a painful truth: Whatever happens with livestock is caused by the human.

"Animals are not stupid. They are not miserable, for the most part. They are responding to what we

do while we're pressuring them. If we don't do what we need to do to get them to respond in the way we want, then that's when people tend to fall back to the whips and canes and where it's more of a forced situation.

"I just try, first of all, to get people to accept the fact that whatever is going on, it's going on because we're causing it. Something we're doing is causing it," she explains.

It sounds like a source of frustration for the humans to take all the responsibility. "You know, it is frustrating," she agrees, "and yet it's liberating in another sense. When you come to understand that, then you can alter what you're doing and you can actually control what the animals do. That is a great feeling to finally get to a point where you can say, 'Yes, whatever happens here is because of what I'm doing.' And when it goes well you can say, 'I did it right! They didn't just fall through the gate. I must have done something right because I got what I wanted,'" she says.

"And if it goes wrong," she adds judiciously, "you can examine what happened, go over it and don't do the same thing again."

Hnatow practices every day what she teaches. Earlier in the day of this interview, she had been at a ranch in Oklahoma where she and a ranch hand, aided by a couple of stock dogs, gathered 400 head of yearling heifers. "We drove them two and a half miles up to the pens, sorted off some, added 87 new ones that came in, and the horses never turned a hair. There was nothing to it. It was absolutely enjoyable, but," she chuckles, "I was paying attention. You have to maintain a certain level of focus," she explains.

Focus is a key ingredient in low-stress stockmanship. Williams is known for his ability to shut out the entire world to focus on the task at hand. Few of us can achieve, much less maintain, that level of single-mindedness. Are we doomed to straying stock? Can we relax and enjoy the interaction with the animals?

Hnatow chuckles at the questions and answers, "Absolutely! If you don't enjoy it, then we need to change something. What you have to do is be aware of everything that's going on with the animals and with yourself. Teach yourself to react in such a way that things don't get out of hand. That's what often happens. We'll be riding or walking along and everything is going fine and everyone's having a good time. Suddenly something goes wrong and then it's a wreck.

"When you get to a certain skill level with this, you'll recognize before the wreck comes. It's a constant check-and-balance just to maintain that even keel from start to finish and that is absolutely enjoyable."

Hnatow compliments the skill of the ranch hand who helped gather the 400 heifers at the Oklahoma ranch, through black locust and greenbriar patches. "We visited and chatted while we rode out to the cattle, but once we got there, any conversation we had was in relation to what we were doing. I don't like to chit-chat while we're trying to get a specific job done, especially one that's difficult, which that job could have been had we made too many mistakes.

"It went very well. He is a very, very good guy to work with. He understands a lot of these things very well. I enjoyed it as much as, well, anything I do. People talk about taking a day off. To me that's a day off," she chuckles.

Before studying with Williams, Hnatow says she would never have tried to gather 400 heifers with just one other person. "Not without 50 guys there to scream and holler and cowboy them through the bush," she admits. Now, gathering 400 head is common and not something to lose sleep over.

"Bud has often said that when you get up to 900 head or so, then your skill level has to come up — you have to step up another rung," she explains. "Less than that, with a little bit of experience, you should be able to manage that with very little problem really.

"I've had up to 500 head here on this Texas ranch by myself. There's no problem. The good thing is all these principles apply to a group of four in the same way they do to a group of 400. I don't necessarily work the group of 400 any differently than I do the group of four – except, of course, logistically going through a gate. Those kinds of things you have to do a little bit differently, but the concepts of how you work them don't change."

Prepare for weaning before calving begins

One of the most stressful times in a herd's life can be weaning. Traditional methods often result in bawling calves and cows, weight loss on both sides, a percentage of sick calves. How does a rancher avoid these conditions?

Hnatow suggests we prepare for weaning before the calves are even born. "The success of weaning is not just whether your calves don't bawl or whether you don't have to doctor any. Whether it fails or succeeds can be controlled by several different factors, one of which is how those calves are handled in the pasture with their mothers. Set the scene for the separation and remove much of the stress that gets put on those calves at weaning time."

She continues, "If you look at cows and calves out on the pasture in the summertime, they're not together all the time. The mother will leave her baby. She may go a mile further to get water. She'll come back to get it when it's time to feed. The cows are not worried about being separated from that calf, necessarily. When they start

to panic is when they feel threatened, right? So, when you're working with your cows and they have their babies on them, make them understand that you're not a threat."

Part of removing the sense of threat is removing the newness of the corrals and pens for the cattle. "Whenever you have an opportunity to work with the cattle, you should do it. If your cows are up near the pens through the summer, or a month before you wean, it's a great idea to bring them up, sort the calves off and let them go back out together."

Hnatow says she has worked with the mature cows in Addison's herd enough that they are experienced with the weaning process. "But I do work with the calves that we buy. I bring them up into the corrals, put them over the scale, let them walk through the working chute. We don't do anything with them (in the chute). We just put them through it. It's good for the cattle and it's good for us.

"Then when the time comes that you are separating them to wean them, it's something they've been exposed to and it's not that big of a deal."

Next, allow yourself time to wean the calves. "From my own experience and on my own family's farm, for most people, the day they wean calves is the day everyone's ripping their hair out saying, 'We've got to get the cows in, we've got to get them sorted, we've got to get this all done.'"

Hnatow pauses to frame a thought and continues, "The day you sort the calves, make sure you have nothing else on your plate, because they will determine how fast it's going to go, or they should determine that. I've had situations when the cows were not brought up to the pens right so we turned them around and took them back out and brought them up properly." This serves as the "reset" button in the minds and behavior of the cattle.

"The way the cows are gathered the day you wean and the way the calves are separated from the cows the day you wean are probably 75 percent of the success of that particular weaning," she says.

"When we wean calves on this particular ranch, they're in the corral for the day that I separate them from the mother. They spend that night in the pen. But the next day they are out on grass. They don't have to be locked into a pen. All that running and bawling is stress-related."

After the calves are separated, introduce them to the feed and water. "It's extremely important that the calves know where the feed and water are — even if you just walk the calves around the pen to walk them past the water, especially," Hnatow says. The calves would eventually find the water on their own, but they've been used to groundwater out in the pastures. "Quite often when people put cattle in the pens, they have electric water systems. The calves don't necessarily savvy that's where they go for a drink of water."

As for eating right off the bat, "I just have never believed the theory that fresh-weaned calves don't eat much for the first two or three days. That does not have to happen," she says. Working with 600-pound weaned calves in Canada, using the low-stress techniques, she saw the calves eating 10 to 12 pounds of silage the day they were weaned.

What are we doing wrong that puts calves off their feed the first few days after weaning? Hnatow sort of sighs and says, "As funny as this sounds, I think people worry too much about getting them to eat.

"It is a very grave mistake to drive the cattle up to the feed. By that I mean get behind them and chase them up to the feed or up to the hay. There are certain ways you work with them in the pen that you can end up with them up at the bunk, but to get behind them and try to drive them up there, causes more damage than it ever solves."

Forcing the calves to the feed causes them to equate a frightening or scary experience with the new feed source. Small wonder they might stay away from it for a few days.

Stressed humans, stressed animals

It appears that low-stress stockmanship, including weaning, requires a low-stressed human work force. "You know, that's what this is all about from the ground up. Low-stress cattle handling is absolutely as much about low stress on the people as it is on the animals.

"Going out to work cattle, for a rancher, should be a 'get-to' thing, not a 'have-to'. That's got to be the carrot at the end of the stick in my mind. It is too bad that it causes people so much stress and anxiety and that, of course, transfers into the animal."

Hnatow says she applies the techniques on horseback and on foot. With some minor adjustments in technique, ranchers can use four-wheelers to move cattle. There's no upper or lower age limit to learn these methods. And, one need not worry about having to learn it all in one setting. "If you can just become reasonably competent at this, you'll find it takes so much less time and energy to get it done. As far as being able to learn, it's all a question of being willing to learn."

To learn more about low-stress stockmanship, attend the 2006 TSCRA School for Successful Ranching, March 25-26, San Antonio. Contact Mark Perrier at 800/242-7820, ext. 118, mperrier@texascattleraisers.org, for registration information. ■