

chapter four

Basics of high control

Few riders like spooky animals, and nobody wants sick ones.

Spooky animals usually have a sensitive disposition and have experienced aggressive handlers.

Sick animals are stressed because they have experienced being forced or shoved, slowed and then speeded up, jammed and yelled at.

Stockmanship is based on an understanding of what creates anxiety, fear, mistrust, and panic in cattle as well as what creates calmness and predictable responsiveness.

Understanding the value of avoiding stress and creating calm, responsive stock is fundamental to learning and continuing the practice of stockmanship.

Good stockmanship has its foundation in the principles of how cattle learn, how they respond to certain movements or techniques, and the importance of certain traits and nuances that must be respected when handling them.

You must learn the principles before you use the techniques so you won't be teaching stock bad habits and can keep the right things happening.

When you know the traits of cattle that must be accommodated, you can be in the right place to get control and set up the right environment so they can do what you desire.

You can't get high control using only good techniques. Good techniques applied the wrong way or with a counterproductive attitude (force) can cause more stress than before.

Chapter Five on behavioral traits of cattle explains the basics of how cattle learn, how they can become calm, and why they get wild. Chapter Eight on techniques shows how to prompt cattle to move the way you desire. Chapters Nine and Ten present tips for solving common problems that riders encounter.

When you put all these pieces of information together, you'll know why cattle do the things they do. You'll have the ability to correct handling problems and prevent them from happening.

Three basics to better control

Good stockmanship is rather simple. It involves believing and adopting three main things:

1. Use handling techniques or signals that livestock can respond to naturally so they can understand your meaning.
2. Stop forcing stock to do what you want. Instead, let them do it by setting it up so they **want** to do it. Replace force with sound handling principles (how stock learn) and the use of livestock traits that make it easier for the cattle to do what you want.
3. Stop doing the things that bother livestock like yelling, curving around them, crowding, jamming, and moving fast so they will be comfortable enough to learn quickly and react calmly.

Steps to change

Simple as stockmanship sounds, it takes time to understand. For some, it takes even longer to break old habits. Some people say, “I tried that low stress stockmanship thing one time, and it didn’t work.” The first time they tried to walk, they likely fell on their faces.

To drive a herd well, place cattle and sort easily, you have to get control over yourself and your horse, gain knowledge, and perfect your timing. Experience is knowledge, so this takes time.

It’s important to understand that getting control over livestock doesn’t happen right away. People seem to go through a process in changing themselves and the cattle.

I’ve identified a few levels of change that I’ve seen some people go through as they learn. As they get better control over themselves and gain more dedication, their animals change more and more.

There is little point to identifying stages except to understand there is both outer and inner changes in riders.

Outer change, such as using good techniques and quitting the yelling and racing around, will yield some improvement but **you have yet to learn to recognize the importance of some little things that mean a lot to the stock, so things go wrong that you might not expect.**

Inner change, which is real dedication to working cattle well, is based 100 percent on how the animals need to be handled, combined with experience and perfect timing to transform them.

One:

Just starting out—outer level of change

A rider heads out to work his herd after learning some things about stockmanship.

A few hundred dry cows are in a meadow. He’s decided to give this method a try and not holler or wave his arms to move them. He decides that today he will gather and drive them to a new pasture and settle them there. He will try a few techniques that he’s learned, like going back and forth in straight lines, try turning the herd, and stopping them to see if it works.

This is a start in the right direction, but he has made at least three common, but major, mistakes so far.

He approaches the animals that are scattered and separated from the group head on. As he gets closer, some heads go up, so he pressures them into their sides. As he does, a few jump away and spin around to look at him.

He switches to riding back and forth across them. A few start to drift towards the main group, but a few sensitive animals trot away, headed towards the end of the big pasture. He gallops off and escorts them back into the bunch.

He's just made another batch of three mistakes.

He remembers instruction regarding approaching and backing off when their heads go up and not approaching sensitive stock straight on. So he re-arranges his approach in handling the other animals on the outer edges of the bunch. He approaches them at a flat angle (not head on) and stops farther out from them when they get nervous, advancing only when they calm down.

When he's close enough, he just stands quietly for a moment and lets them turn and head towards the group. He lets them relieve the pressure by moving off, without shoving, more than he's used to. He sees how stopping when they get nervous and advancing when they are calm works to calm animals. These things all help, and he can see it works better.

He is still almost guaranteed to have some problems with the cattle the way things are now. But this is a start.

Obvious mistakes made so far:

1. The rider simply decided to give this method a "try" to see if it worked like its claimed. **Every rider must first believe that it works and decide to fully commit to it before expecting good results.**
2. He started out having decided he would drive the cattle to a new pasture and settle them. **No rider should pre-determine what to do when first working stock to handle better. Approach, watch, and see how the cattle need to be worked, based on their reaction to what you do.**
3. He wanted to try some techniques to see if they worked. **Every rider should start using only the techniques listed in this book and do so with absolute surety that they do work when applied according to the instructions.**
4. He approached the scattered animals directly, head on. **This makes it hard for the stock to see him, so the sensitive cattle took off.**
5. He ignored the meaning of the stock jumping away and spinning around. **These stock need more basic handling to get them to experience that pressure has a release, that he isn't aggressive, and won't do things that bother them.**
6. He should not have galloped off to escort the few cattle that trotted off back to the main bunch. **Running and forcing stock back heightens their anxiety and stress.**

Now the herd has come together and starts moving together. But pretty quick, 10 or 15 of the lead cattle take off from the bunch. He gallops ahead and gets them. He returns them directly back to the herd. They stay in the middle of the bunch, and the drive continues. Pretty soon some wander off again and start taking side trails. He trots out and brings them back in. This happens 5 or 10 times along the way.

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The rider made a few repeat mistakes here that will show up, especially when he stops the herd.

He will come to understand that **stock can't be chased and forced back into the herd**. This appears to work as they hide out in the middle. But they will leave the bunch when they get a chance.

The handler rides up the sides of the herd to slow and stop them. He stays around an hour or so, returning little bunches that keep leaving the herd.

Stock that keep leaving the herd because they are thinking someplace else is more secure, won't stay. They need more and/or better handling before expecting them to stay. Stock won't stay, or drive well, or sort well, etc., unless they want to.

The rider leaves for the ranch. The next day most of the herd is back to where he first picked them up the day before. He has to gather and move them again. He calls me to get some advice on what to do.

Two: Using techniques the right way, with some handling sense and tips

After getting more advice, the rider heads out to work the cattle that came back (didn't stay). He approaches the bunch at a flat angle (not head on), edging closer, watching the stock all the time.

As he approaches, a head comes up, so he backs off a minute until she goes back to grazing again. Then he gets closer. Another head goes up, and he backs off. He continues to go back and forth behind the herd, walking in long, fairly straight lines, edging closer and closer until the herd moves off.

He's trying not to bunch them too early this time, just work them until they are calm so they want to come together more. He drifts the herd along a short ways, and a cow in the lead trots off. About 12 others go with her.

The rider leaves the herd and goes with these bunch quitters for awhile, following just behind. When they slow and stop, he does too. He waits a few minutes, then carefully starts them moving. But they trot off. He follows. This happens a couple of times more before he can get them to turn back to the herd.

When they rejoin the bunch (are all together and stopped moving), the rider gets away and waits about three minutes, just letting them be together. Then he works straight lines back and forth, and the herd moves off nicely.

Then the lead cows start curving off to the left, so he goes straight out wide to the left until they straighten out. This happens a few more times until they drive straight and all together. He goes up the sides to slow them, and the lead part of the herd takes off running through a fence and into the next pasture.

He has quite a wreck getting them back through the gate and spends till nightfall fixing the fence. He calls for advice.

Three: Getting the cattle to working first, in an easy place

The next time, the rider gathers the whole herd and puts them in a large corral. He starts working the animals in the corral, pressuring into the sides of any and all that are near him until they respond calmly to it.

He lets them get bunched to the other end of the corral, opposite to where he brought them in. He lets them drift back, with him in the middle, so

they all have to go by him. A few have to scamper by, so he repeats the process and they are all calm about it.

He lets them out of the corral while he stands at the gate so they have to go by him. Some trot past, so he follows them until they slow and turn back into the others.

He puts them all in the corral again and lets them out the gate. All do it calmly this time.

So he gets some other riders, and they take the herd out of the corral onto the range. A few cows start to get too far ahead of the herd, so one rider goes up and follows them and works them until they are calmer and can be easily turned back in.

When all the animals are together, the riders wait a few minutes and let the herd be together. Then they go back and forth in a line and drift the herd a mile or so.

Then they start driving them at a comfortable pace for the cows. After about an hour, they all stay together and move together, no bumping or crowding.

The riders back off pressure and the herd slows and drifts into where they want them to settle and stay. They back off away from the herd and watch. Fifteen minutes later a few start drifting away, grazing and walking, grazing and walking. They pressure these stock ahead away from the bunch, letting them pick the pace. They turn back to the herd and stay quietly.

The riders leave for the day. Success! The next day, every animal is right where it was left the day before.

They approach the herd again, taking much time to get the stock up and prepare them for a drive up the mountain trail to a new grazing area.

Things go well until they hit the steep hillside. The lead cows stop and won't be driven up that hill. The other riders in the back turn up the heat. Pretty soon, cows are breaking back. Things have unraveled.

The lead rider calls for advice.

The next day, the riders gather up all the stock that have scattered, drive them all together until they are calmly working and they get good movement and start up the hill. This time the head rider is at the front. He pressures the side of the first cow facing uphill. She goes and he steps back, pressuring each cow as it goes by.

The herd is going up. Then two riders go up the sides and straight back down, against the flow. All the stock climb the hill wonderfully. The riders drift and settle them on the new area. They stay where they put them.

What's been learned

The riders have learned that force is counter-productive to control and that whistling and yelling is laziness and lack of knowledge, and if they pressure right and release right away, they get **more** responsive cattle.

Riders work straight lines better. They watch the stock most of the time and change positions as the stock indicate they must. They've also learned a few tips about overcoming some range handling problems like getting stock up a steep hill.

The most crucial thing they have learned is that **the cattle are responding to everything they do**. They are responsible for what the cattle are doing.

They want to learn more.

Four: Good attitude (dedication to the animals is high)

The riders can now handle a big herd in most situations. They have learned to work the middle of the herd when they slow and practiced some sorting at the corral.

They have had some failures at placing the herd but realized it was because they got in a hurry or didn't let the movement die with all the animals in the herd. All of them have taken riding lessons so their horses are getting real light and supple and are highly controllable.

They have learned a few effective strategies for running on the range. Things like bringing the stock all the way up the canyon first instead of starting them at the bottom and grazing up. Once at the top, they let them graze downhill so it's easier for them to graze in the uplands after drinking from the creek. All they have to do to get to the uplands now is walk out horizontally. This is easier for cows and bulls and helps them from clogging up in the bottoms.

They move stock in the cool of the day after they have had an hour of feed or early before they take the first feed of the day. They also show up at the same time of day before the stock start to graze, which makes it easier to move them to a new pasture. They take some extra time to get them mothered up or ready to move.

Inner Change The core of high control and lowering stress

The core of achieving transformational change in a herd is when riders have learned to set up every situation so the stock want to do what riders want.

They watch the animals all the time and change position right away as they see they must. They put themselves in a position to help the animals do things.

The handlers' beliefs have changed because their understanding is greater. They know they have a great deal to offer the stock. They are sure of what the stock will eventually do, so they have some patience about getting them to do it.

Nothing is forced. Problems are corrected by thinking, relying on knowledge, and quiet persistence with the cattle.

Riders are dedicated to stockmanship and no longer have to fight old habits. Problems can be handled independently, because they know and use the principles on how stock learn and always remember the traits of the cattle.

When you've changed this much inside yourself, your actions will show it, the stock will know it right away, and you will have their full trust, respect and attention in a short time.

Now the cattle don't move away from you out of fear or mistrust or because you scare or bother them. They do just what you ask, because they understand it produces what they seek. They respond because they respect what you ask and are sure there's a calm way out. They see there can be a purpose to it. They know that you mean it, because you quietly persist with pressuring. They want to do it and like moving to someplace different. There are few hassles and certainly no wrecks.

This is where the real health benefits come in. You have changed the way cattle normally perceive you. You are the master of all of them. They can deal effectively and comfortably with that, so they turn over real control to you.

When you genuinely blame yourself for whatever goes wrong, either for not working enough ahead of time or for what you did wrong, and more importantly—really see and take satisfaction in all that goes right—that’s positive change and worth much. If you have a sick cow or calf, you quickly assume you created it and seek to correct it. This transformation in you is the core of what creates real change in the stock.

You can stop any herd when needed, have lunch, tell and laugh at jokes. No worries or tension about where the herd will wander off to before you get back. You horse will be better and probably calmer.

Setting goals

My wife and I made a holistic goal that had three parts: First, we described what we deeply valued; second, we identified what we had to produce to help achieve these values; and third, decided what kind of environment we needed to have to support our goal.

Learning about and practicing good livestock handling fits under what we need to produce to realize our values, because it produces more time for us. It produces a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. It also helps us create both healthy range and cattle, which is part of the environment we are creating.

The point is: You must have an end in mind while working stock. It must mean a great deal to you. If everyone in the family or on the ranch doesn’t clearly recognize the importance of it, they won’t do it, and it probably won’t work.

My general goal with my cattle—or anybody else’s that I’m working—is to eventually have the complete but calm attention of every animal in the bunch, 100 percent of the time. Stock should be waiting for what I ask for next and willing to respond to whatever I want them to do whenever I ask. No animals should react to thoughts of their own to protect their safety.

You have to be careful, though, about setting a goal with any animal. Otherwise, you can end up imposing your agenda on them before they can do it. The stock determine, solely, how fast you can progress and reach your goal. You must have in mind what’s possible to achieve but let the animals progress on their timeframe. The source of many handling problems is trying to impose your way of doing it on the stock.

Placing 900 pair on a mountain side

A few years ago, a rider wanted a herd of about 900 pair to stay on an upland range area of a few thousand acres that was between two creeks. He asked for my help, and I agreed.

This area needed to be grazed well. It had a lot of old standing dead plant material that was smothering growth and needed to be eaten or trampled to the soil surface. The soils were starting to crust, and very few young plants were coming up.

We wanted to break up this crust to improve water and air movement and firm up the soil to help grass plants germinate.

We needed a three- or four-day stay for the herd to accomplish this. It meant we had to reverse the typical pattern of grazing where stock grazed the creek bottoms the first three days and a day or so in the uplands.

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The riparian area condition needed to be enhanced so we wanted little or no bank shear from hooves. We wanted some grazing on the banks and knew the cattle would probably select the bluegrass over the sedges, which would give the bank-holding sedges some more sunlight.

The main rider had been working this herd for weeks, so all the stock moved straight ahead when pressured from the sides. They were comfortable when going by us. We moved the herd off the last pasture early in the morning before they got up and started grazing. We drove them a short ways onto the place were they were to stay.

On the way, I noticed that whenever we backed off the pressure a bit the stock really wanted to slow. None wanted to keep going on their own accord, which was a good sign that taking the movement out would be easy. We showed them water on the way as we crossed one creek. We had them lined up a road going up the hillside. Then I rode up the side and let the herd slow.

We let them drift out across the hillsides, spaced so they each had enough feed for a few days. We turned animals at the front so they were facing inward to the herd. We got ourselves well away and watched. We had to stop a few that started drifting too much and turned them back in with light pressure.

This bunch stayed put all week. They went to water in the creeks and returned to the herd. We gathered them up and moved on to the next grazing area easily. The soil crusts were broken up fairly well, and we achieved a very high proportion of plants grazed, at about a 50 to 60 percent level of use at the time.

The next year, more plants came up and the vigor of the older ones had markedly improved. The creeks met all Forest Service standards. This was part of a herd that the year before would have been scattered all over and loafing in the creeks as long as you let them (and even when you didn't let them).