

chapter six

Mindset of a good rider

People are probably the ultimate predators. Nothing rattles livestock like people mishandling them. Perhaps this is because our natural reaction is to force the issue when confronted with a problem.

Traditional handling

Since modern handling creates a host of problems, cattle are forced a lot. We rope them into trailers, hot shot them up into the chute, scare them up an alley, run them off the creek, or cram them through the gate.

I saw a stampede one July day when 1,500 cows and calves were driven 12 miles. Then they ran back 12 miles because they ultimately couldn't take the pressure of being driven through a gate. It was an exceptionally wide gate, but they couldn't go through. The riders couldn't get ahead of the dust to stop the stampede. They handled the drive and going through the gate the way most people handle cattle around here.

I'm sure these cows didn't want to stampede in the middle of a hot summer afternoon, and I'm real sure the riders didn't want them to. The riders made a gather and tried the same drive again the next day.

The stock still couldn't go through that gate, but they were ready for it (cow sense). They had a few extra riders and held them from breaking back. But they had to drive them five miles beyond the gate, through one pasture and a pass leading into the right one.

In doing so, they lost the use of the pasture they drove the stock through, because they had grazed the creek bottom down to minimum stubble height standards. The managing agency wouldn't allow them back into it.

At least 125 calves had to be doctored for pneumonia the following week.

Traditional handling versus stockmanship

I was working cattle one day with Bud Williams, and we had a few hundred head going smoothly through a gate.

All of a sudden Bud stopped working the herd from where he was. One animal had stopped to look back at us. Bud went up a little wide and towards the gate, past the animal. It calmly moved right on through, just because

Mindset of a good rider

Bud moved up that way so it could see him. This one, out of hundreds, needed help, Bud accommodated him.

Most of us would have got right in there and pressured it to go. That's was my first thought at the time.

That may have worked for the moment, but it wouldn't have alleviated the concern this animal had about seeing us the next time we worked him.

The concern was real to the animal and important enough to stop it from going. So it was important enough for Bud to address.

It might seem annoying to have to change what you are doing, but accommodating stock this way produces calmer animals and more control the next time you handle them.

There are two distinct attitudes between handlers in these two examples, and certainly, two different sets of knowledge.

Bud knows that if cattle are working well for us (take pressure well), and if we work where they need us to be, they won't short out at the gate.

If Bud had been on the drive when the cattle stampeded, I'm pretty sure he would have worked them first until he knew they would go through. And he probably wouldn't have wanted "help" from those riders.

We have the knowledge laid on the table to get high control over cattle. We have two choices to make: Handle the stock with whole-hearted dedication to learning and thinking—or stay the course and deal with the never-ending problems and limitations of traditional handling.

How cattle respond is a direct reflection of how well you control yourself. The calmness and responsiveness of your cattle reflects how well you turn over your will to how they need to be handled.

If you want healthy animals and high control, you must be willing, in every situation, to get the job done right. Right means the way the cattle need it done.

Effective riders have a good attitude. Some have just a little skill at it, others a little more. But all of them take full ownership of the fact that they are causing whatever the herd does on the range.

The best handlers have the best attitudes. They watch, adjust, and constantly move to where the stock show them they need to be to get the job done right, all the time.

Put the same energy into learning and watching that you once put into chasing wild cows. Nobody likes wild cattle, so why make them that way? Don't tolerate wild ones. Change them by working them right.

Confidence in this method, backed with a little knowledge, will get things done right. I know I can get cattle calm and responsive. It doesn't matter where. Because of this belief and confidence, I know I can do things very easily that formerly took hard riding and help.

I was riding with an agency fellow one day on an allotment in Mackay, Idaho, checking the progress of a new range plan. I went one way and he the other. He rode up about an hour later, his horse all lathered up. Chased by wolves? No. He had seen a few cattle in a paddock where they shouldn't be, right near a gate. He thought he would just drive them out real quick since he was there. He chased 'em 45 minutes and then gave up.

He asked if I could help. We rode up to find 5 or 6 tired cows and a few calves lying in a wide draw 40 to 60 yards from the open gate. We rode wide of them, and I got off my horse. I approached them from the side, edging a little closer each time until I could see which head went up first. Then I backed off and waited.

I did this a few more times, edging closer and waiting each time if they got alarmed. I pressured the most sensitive one into her side and backed off. I pressured again in a minute, and she got up. I pressured again, backed off, and she trotted off about 10 yards.

The agency fellow whispered that I had her headed the wrong way, that she would run up the hill again. He wanted to ride up to block her in case she went that way. “No,” I said, “It’s all right.” I waited a minute, pressured her again, and she moved. So I stopped and waited. I pressured her hip away and she turned, facing the gate. I pressured into her side, and she walked straight towards the gate. I just walked along off to her right side, angling out and away from her, guiding, so she didn’t circle me and miss the gate.

I did about the same thing with another one. Then the others followed and went through as I worked from near the gate. They headed off to rejoin the herd.

There was very little skill involved in my doing this—and almost no physical effort. It took just a little understanding of why these cows couldn’t go through the gate. I had a whole lot of caring about getting them in a frame of mind so they could do it. That’s all. The cattle wanted to get across the fence anyway, just not with a rider racing around behind them. The herd was on the other side, not far over the hill.

Later that week, the association had to trail the whole herd up a road. The same agency fellow told me there was a place where the stock always went off the road into a wet meadow off to the left. He said he would just as soon that didn’t happen again.

I told him it wouldn’t if he would get ahead and stand on the uphill side of the trail to the stock’s right as they trailed through and pressured into their sides a little bit as they went by.

As I brought the first of the herd onto that part of the road, I saw him off his horse and standing below the road, blocking the side trails to the meadow. He was having a heck of a time blocking them.

So I rode up on the opposite side on the uphill of the trail and meadow and pressured cows as they went by. Most of the time I just kept up a little motion while on my horse. The next 500 or so pairs went straight by without falling off into the meadow.

The moral of this story: **Don’t try to stop cattle from doing what they aren’t doing.**

If you put yourself in the place to block them, they look to see you, then follow their head. You created exactly the problem you set out to prevent.

Believe that cattle want to see what’s pressuring them. They won’t turn and lose sight of you if you are pressuring. Work them from a place where they can see you and where you want them to go.

Riding is a tough job, but it can be a whole lot easier when riders learn the traits of cattle, how they learn, and how to move them.

Mindset of a good rider

Attitudes about force and getting the job done at the expense of livestock or range health have to change. Cattle will do everything we need and will be healthier if we just set it up right and let them do it.

To livestock, force is anything they construe as giving them little or no option but to go a certain way or do a certain thing. If you move to stop or block cattle, relaying the idea “no,” that’s force.

The real secret is to never let them know they are under restraint. Never make them to do anything they don't want to do. Let it become their idea to do everything you want.

Believe the facts about how livestock learn and what traits you have to accommodate to let them do what you want. Use them in every facet of animal handling as you pressure animals. Do this from day one. As you gain experience, your trust will increase.

Quiet persistence in pressuring is all that is ever needed until stock have had enough time to experience that they will not be trapped or forced into doing anything. Let them learn that doing the “wrong” thing produces continued pressure, which will help them want to do what you ask. They will do it when they are able to. This refers to everything—turning, slowing, speeding up, going through a gate, and stopping.



“Wildest cattle I ever seen. One or Two in a bunch and some bunches ain't got any in 'em.”



Force has become part of our recreational activities.

Force can make things worse

Here are some perceptions of force that livestock may have in certain situations.

Force

A cow being sorted away from her calf or the herd would feel forced if we asked for speed and direction.

Riders are running and shouting behind the stock to get them through a gate.

Riders run up the left side of a herd to get them to turn right, blocking the left side.

“Busting” stock or making the wrong thing hard by running them off the creek bottom.

Getting stock started out of the corral or fence corner by leaving only one way open.

A sensitive first-calf heifer breaks back from the herd to look for a calf that was actually near her all along. You get mad, run out and block it and send the stupid animal back into the herd at a run, bowling over a few others as she hits the herd. Forcing it back might take only a minute or two, but you’ll have to do it again, because she won’t want to stay with the herd.

Let

Ask for just direction. Let the cow set the pace away from the herd. Quietly persist and soon she will go anywhere willingly.

Stock are handled first to give to pressure before pressuring them through a gate. They go straight ahead when pressured. Then riders move to the front and pressure so they can see what’s pressuring them at the gate. They decide to go because they can.

A line of people in proper position pressure one side and back off the other so stock will want to go toward the open side and turn. The open side is created when riders advance (i.e., up the left). Rider on the right stops or backs off so the stock want to turn right.

Gather them up comfortably and drive them with good movement so they want to go.

Start a herd going by allowing them to choose the direction. Set it up so they start moving.

You know the calf is in the herd so you go with the heifer, moving slower than she is until she stops. When she stops, you stop. You continue this until she’s quiet and her attention is on you. Then you ask her to turn toward the herd. If she doesn’t turn, you go with her some more and ask again until she is willing to turn. When you can get her to go anywhere you want quietly, return her to her calf in the herd.

Let the cow go back to the last place she thinks she left the calf. Once she has checked the spot and doesn’t find it, she will return to the herd on her own.

Letting stock

“Letting” stock means being in the right spot to encourage them to do what you want according to what is important to them, such as being in a place where they can see you and going through a gate as you pressure.

Let the stock decide what they want to do as they react to your pressure and release by positioning yourself, pressuring and moving so they will want to go that way.

If you’re not in the proper position to let them do something, then you’ll have problems. You have to be where the stock tell you that you need to be so they can do it. If you are out of position or moving wrong, the stock will show you.

Remember, too, that you need to accommodate the emotional needs of livestock by stopping the stuff that bothers and stresses them like loud noises, fast movements, crowding, and jamming.

While these things aren’t necessarily force, they distract them from being able to respond well to you. Ceasing to do these things will create an additional measure of calmness that will allow stock to be able to respond to correct pressure. No part of real stockmanship entails getting a job done by buzzing up the stock.

Stock are less stressed and more comfortable if they have two or more directions to go when pressured. Always try to give them that option, especially when first training. When stock are handling well, you make one way more open than the other.

Adjust what you are doing if stock need help doing some things that are difficult for them. If the lead animals slow or stop, work only a small area in the back, behind the lead. Work so you get close enough to get the lead going again. As the lead goes, pressure cattle on either side of

you to go. Turning up the heat across the whole back side will just shove the back into the middle. This sometimes happens when stock get balled up going up or down a steep hill or through a gate.

You can also stop pressuring the back when this occurs. Perhaps go up front and move the leaders with direct pressure first so the back and middle can have a place to go.

There will be times when stock know you want them to do something, and they just won’t want to—like going down a steep hill, moving off a creek bottom on a hot day, or getting off bedding on a cold one. In these instances, you might have to pressure until they realize a “no” answer produces continual pressure.

Accommodating emotional aspects

Observation and feel are important

When first handling animals, you’re working to get a feel for their perception of you. Are they scared of you? Unusually sensitive? Bullheaded to something you ask? Do they just move out of your way?

This determination must happen first before you can have any hope of charting the right course for getting them to handle well. Observation, moving properly, and perfect timing get them to do what they want to do.

Your attention, understanding, and consistency will produce calm, responsive and attentive stock. It only happens in that order.

Whether you are just getting your animals working for you or working some that already are, you must constantly watch. In the beginning, watch for signs of how they perceive you so you can change if you see the stock think you are rotten.

Later, watch to determine your effect on how they move and then change and adjust pressure as they either over- or under-react.

A good rider moves in, finds out how each thing he does affects them, and adjusts immediately if it doesn't work.

Change what you're doing at the first sign from an animal that it's worried about it—or isn't responding well to it. This might mean moving up so it can see you better. It might mean firming up pressure if it isn't trying or distracted. It might mean keeping up quiet, persistent pressure when necessary.

You should only create avenues for the cattle to choose. Let them choose to walk and stay with the bunch instead of run, turn, slow, or whatever you are asking. Make one way or one thing the best and more open than all the others. Set it up and wait until they can take the profitable direction. If the open way is more difficult, then you must help them do it.

When they choose the “wrong” thing, it is mostly because you didn't set up the situation well enough or they aren't relaxed enough yet to respond to take it. Getting the “wrong” thing means you either adjust what you're doing or start with them at another place in handling where you can start with more calmness.

If stock do the wrong thing like turn off the mountain trail and side hill, go with them. Let them do what they feel they should do at that time. Don't try to stop it. Set it up again but change how you do it so they will want to take it.

Then if they do this again, put on some pressure, not too firmly, and apply it so they put this pressure on themselves by choosing the wrong thing. Then help them go up the mountain trail, maybe by moving up to the front and pressuring into their sides or by leading them. If it's done right, they will choose to do it, and you will have a better handling herd for the experience.

Readiness in the cattle to do everything you ask must be sensed, not ignored, and never forced. This is important to the cattle.

If my horse is walking straight but I notice he keeps thinking left, I prepare so when he turns left, he immediately feels my right leg and some pressure on the left indirect rein. He perceives this as pressure he put on himself.

If I'm sorting a cow that is going straight but starting to think about turning left, I start moving left and am there when she moves left. She perceives this as walking or moving into her own pressure, and she can make her own choice about where freedom is. In almost no time at all, my choice becomes her choice, because she won't want to keep walking into pressure very long.

One day, I was working some steers that seemed “trained” to go a certain way (left through a gate) when gathered. But I wanted to place them in a different pasture to the right. I got them working for me fairly well and the drive going, but they would veer left towards this one gate. They were sure that was the way to go.

I went out wide to the left side to turn them away from it, and I could see that all but a few (the ones at the lead) would readily turn. The lead animals' eyes bugged a little. They stiffened and picked up the pace faster to get to that gate. I stayed out wide just a second more, but I could see that wasn't going to affect the change. They would feel forced, so I went back behind and encouraged the pace to continue.

In a minute I went out wide again, but the one in the lead still didn't want to turn. His eyes weren't bugged out so much this time, so I was winning. Coming in near the gate, I just let them go through. But they wanted to slow, so I kept them going up an alley way into a corral. Then I worked them around the corral, asking for turns, to speed up, slow, and stop. They soon got calm about all this. Then I drove them back out the gate to the fields.

I slowed and stopped them once we were a ways out the gate, then picked them up and started off towards the new gate and pasture that I wanted them in.

Now the lead steer wanted to go farther right than I wanted (back to another part of the pasture). I went out wide to the right and he turned just a bit, so I went back to working back and forth behind the herd. I quickly asked him to turn to the left again, and he did.

I went back (all the time watching him) and sure enough he was thinking right again, so I immediately moved right before he did. He walked into his own pressure (me being out wide before he turned) and turned back left. We practiced turns a few times. He was easy to drive from then on and went wherever I wanted. His attention was now on me and on what I would ask next, not on following the old pattern of moving as he thought he should.

I believe the turning point was when he walked into his own pressure. His past experience was that he should lead the way and speed up if riders went wide. His new experience was that turning away from pressure is profitable.

I never really get after any stock for not doing the right thing. They are doing as they think they should, so I just go along with them. I don't ever worry about them getting the best of me, because I don't look at it that way. Getting sore at them is a waste of energy. Quietly persist in working

them so the wrong thing appears not profitable. Make the right things an option they could take. Make it profitable for them. **That's all you need to do.**

I have confidence in what I can do and what cattle will do. In fact, I'm far more confident about what the cattle will do.

When I know they can load into a chute or trailer, there is never a doubt in my mind about what I'm asking for. I have no care when they do it, so there isn't anxiety in their minds about going in. They know that I mean what I'm asking because I've quietly persisted in getting it before. I've taken them places calmly, quietly, and comfortably so they have no fear of what will happen. They can always do what I ask and know there is an open way out.

Never try to change cattle. You don't have to try. And it doesn't work anyway. Trust the fact that stock want to get along with us, want to relieve pressure, want to go in the direction they are facing, want to see what's pressuring them, and want to be with the herd.

I always have a clear picture of what I want these animals to do, but **how they do it** is way more important. I don't care if they do what I had in mind. If they don't do it, and I was right the way I asked, they weren't ready. So we go back to something easier or simpler for them. When they are calm enough, I let them do it when they are ready. Don't ask if you don't think they will do it yet.

Cattle want relief and freedom more than anything. For this reason, never make the wrong thing too difficult. This will just scare them, and they won't believe that you aren't aggressive.

Make it clear that responding well to your handling means freedom from pressure. Once they understand this is **always the deal** between them and you, they will work for that momentary freedom. This is why you must always provide some relief in between requests.

Sometimes I pressure cattle against the back of the pen if I want them to go to the front. This helps them make the choice. I persist quietly with pressure to speed them up if they are going too slow. Then I back off a touch and follow up the movement. The whole herd knows I did this.

I sometimes stand between wherever I want them to go and where they are. This helps them see me and where to go. When you do things this way, they want to do whatever you want them to do. It helps them to do it.

When they are ready and really working well for me, then and only then can I focus on exactly what I want them to do. But still without ever caring, worrying, or being anxious about whether they do it, in case I've misjudged their readiness.

When I'm right in my handling, they will do it. I am 100 percent sure of this. This is the nature of the animal. This is the key. They are sure that pressure has a release and know they can do something completely natural in order to get the release, and they get the chance to work off less pressure.

Good handling requires intense focus and concentration on what the stock are doing and what I need to change, so I'm looking towards what they will do next. The only constant thing is that I keep changing the details of what I'm doing so it fits each and every animal. The thing I'm working on is fitting myself to a changing situation.

You must understand that handling stock is working your mind. In time, you can get their feet to work through their minds.

What the feet do before their minds have changed over to getting comfortable and trusting you isn't important. If you care about what the feet do before their minds are right, you miss the whole point. If the stock weigh anything you ask them to do, you haven't worked them enough to do these things or aren't asking right.

Becoming accomplished at good handling requires thinking, practice, and experience.

Good handling is based on how animals think. They are the teachers. The art to it is the feel and timing that you must gain in order to respond to changing situations and developing integrity with the animals.

You must anticipate some things happening and react before the stock do. You must believe them, and they must believe you are fair. This can't be fully taught. It has to be experienced. It is much like dancing with your partner—the more you do it, the better you get at moving well together.

What not to do

Because of the nature of livestock, there are some things that will help them listen to you. Just plain memorize these items and **don't do them!**

Don't...

- Yell, holler, or create loud noise.
- Pressure from directly behind for any length of time.
- Pressure from head on. Stock can't see you well when you're right in front, so work them only from the sides or at an angle to the neck or hip or go back and forth across.
- Shove or push (pressure then release only).

Mindset of a good rider

- Crowd them closely together or jam them into each other.
- Move fast or tear around when handling.
- Jump in front of them or spin them around.
- Work them from too far away.
- Walk or ride in curved lines.
- Work them when you're in a bad mood (attitude is everything).

Good handling involves not doing wrong things. The best horse trainers and livestock handlers do the fewest wrong things.

No one knows immediately how or where to start with new cattle, but they do know to get the feel of the stock so they can find the right things quickly.

Stock will move away from noise they find irritating. This has no place in stockmanship, so keep the noise down to the level of normal conversation and keep it non-aggravating. Cattle can hear sounds as much as 10 times fainter than we can.

When you whistle or yell at a couple of cows that aren't moving, you are also prompting the animals that are doing the right thing. The ones moving well are likely to try something else because noise applies to every one of them within hearing distance.

Excessive pressure that causes bumping and crowding in a herd is about as stressful as anything you can do. Change whatever it is you are doing to cause it. On the range, riders usually cause it by curving up the sides or shoving the back of the herd into the middle. Back at the corral, if you have a 10-cow pen, don't put 11 in it.

Fast moves or how fast you push stock heighten their stress level. Move them out at a good walk but don't get them running.

Don't chase the stock. The one exception is if a calf breaks back and you have to go get ahead of it.

When you're working the stock right, you shouldn't have to do much more than trot your horse in almost any situation.

Do the right things

- Keep the noise down.
- Work in and out of the flight zone when you want something. Get out of it if you don't.
- Work as close as you can.
- Be patient. Practice setting it up right, waiting, and giving it time to happen.
- Watch stock all the time to see the effect you are having on them. This allows you to move early and slower rather than later and faster.
- Always move in straight lines.

Animals need to know it's okay to do certain things like going around or by you through a gate or up a chute. It's the going by you, rather than going into the chute or through a gate, that often concerns them.

Let them go by and around you a few times so they know it's okay and realize you aren't going to over pressure or jump in front of them when they do.

As you prepare to work stock

Most cattle have some concern about people. Usually the first thing I do with a herd is to see if any of them view me as aggressive. I erase their fear or anxiety by asking for simple performance.

With good handling, even real sensitive animals that have been handled roughly will see that we back off when they show us they can't handle what we're doing. They understand we allow them some room when they are scared.

Keep your good herd boss status by not doing the wrong things and by doing at least a few things right. Good techniques, applied correctly, are the right things. You'll find out that you don't need to holler or chase them. The stock will appreciate that. So might your spouse. For sure your horse will.

Herds that are even moderately well handled show remarkable response to herders on the range. Some of these herders are so well accepted that the stock seem to just know what they want. These riders often just show up and talk. The pairs mother up, look for direction from the riders, then travel off to where they are encouraged to go. They even pause to look for direction from the riders during the drive when coming to a crossroad or turnoff.

Cattle that wait on your direction make it hard to stay humble, but it's enjoyable.

A very important point that has great influence on the stock but isn't easy to explain is this: If you want a cow to go through a gate, she turns up the hill.

If you really focus on the goal or the end you have in mind, the animals know it. Your concern about the gate creates concern in the stock enough that they can't do it. They get suspicious. So it's very important that you remain unconcerned about what happens. Just let it happen by working the animals until they will do it.

If you really care about getting an animal into the trailer, you probably won't get it to go in. If you don't get concerned or focus on it and don't care, they go right in.

One of the difficulties of handling stock well is what you learn about yourself. The change in attitude that must happen might take years. Unfortunately, this change is what you need the most when you first start, when even the most simple techniques are new to you. I don't know any way to teach this change. But it will happen when you see over and over again what a little belief, knowledge, and right frame of mind produces in the stock.

