

## Halter Training Beef Cattle

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Image: Bailey Toates, Georgia Cattlemen's Association

### Introduction

There are a large number of sports and projects for people to focus their attention towards. Whichever activities people choose, it is eventually understood that there are some proven methods for success. For example, if you dream of being on a successful basketball team you must practice and be coached by someone that knows the game. In other words, you don't just pick a coach at random that has no concept of the game and expect to have success. The players must be well trained, and they must have a skilled coach to help them find success. The following information focuses on how to be a good coach during the halter training process for beef cattle. If you or someone you know is planning to halter train beef cattle, remember the calf must be coached. It will not instinctively know what to do. Good coaching equals better results.

### Discussion of Possible Training Methods and Animal Behavior

There are numerous methods used to halter train cattle such as letting the halter drag while loose in a pen, tie to a donkey, hold on to the halter as you release them from the chute. The later option should be considered dangerous and only performed by very experienced handlers. Dr. Temple Grandin states in her book *Human Livestock Handling*, "When animals are forced in a rough manner to do something, stress will be much higher". Fear is a significant stressor. Animals cope with stress physiologically by releasing steroidal hormones such as cortisol. Other adrenaline like hormones can cause a fight or flight response that can create a dangerous situation for animal handlers. Animals that are handled calmly exhibit less fear and are less likely to react in an aggressive survival mode.

One method of calf training used by some begins by placing the halter on the calf while in a chute and then releasing the calf from the chute with the handler attempting to maintain control of the calf. This method introduces the halter and the handler all at the same time without prior desensitizing to either stressor. In other words, it is a rodeo approach to halter training. Not only is it dangerous, there is a chance that a bad experience could cause the calf to be even less likely to trust than they would otherwise. They will likely associate the handler and the halter to an event to be greatly feared. This process can work but requires great strength and a higher than normal skill level.

The donkey maybe works for those extremely tough cases, but hopefully those cattle are not destined for the show ring. Cattle that require the use of tools or equipment will take much



longer to train and should not be considered as good candidates for training.

The halter dragging option is popular, but it seems to delay the inevitable and can create as many bad habits if the calf is trained to being free to roam while wearing a halter. This method may work for some cattle to help with the concept of responding with submission to the pull of the halter. However, the process of desensitizing the calf to the handler will still need to take place. If the calf is used to the halter and not the person, the leading process will be difficult for other reasons and mostly it will be due to the calf not being accustomed to a handling in its flight zone. This process also must be intently watched for halters that lock at the jaw and prevent the calf from drinking and eating normally. This can cause significant swelling and an additional association of fear with the halter.

There are numerous methods for halter training cattle and most eventually work. However, halter training performed by a knowledgeable coach working with the animal's behavioral instincts should achieve more favorable results long term. Building trust through the process described in the remainder of this article should work if discipline, patience, and good cattle handling skills are utilized. Some situations are difficult in even the best facilities with the best handlers. Cattle temperament can vary widely from breed to breed and even as much within a breed. Genetics are a large contributing factor to this difference (Grandin, 2008). Calf temperament should be an integral part of your cattle selection process. Novice showman will benefit greatly by starting out with even-tempered, highly trainable cattle.

### **Desensitizing the Calf to Handlers and Surroundings**

Training beef calves to be haltered and led working with their behavioral instincts can be very rewarding for you and hopefully better for the calf. This process begins by bringing the calf into a secure 12x12 pen, approximately, with at least one additional calf in a near by pen to help the animal transition to its new environment. An isolated calf will not typically do as well from a performance or halter training standpoint. An isolated calf in a new environment is not ideal and should be avoided if possible. Here are some points for selecting a calf to train:

- Ideally begin to train while the prospect is lighter weight and younger, approximately 6 to 7 months of age
- Larger, older cattle can be trained, but this typically calls for more strength and safety risk on behalf of the coach.
- Select calm, even-tempered calves

You ideally want to bring the calf in the pen during the day for 1 or 2 days without doing more than feeding and occasionally cleaning the stall (3-4 times in a day). On the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, or when it seems the calf you're training is settling down, enter the stall with a show stick. Understanding point of balance is essential for this portion of the process. The coach will need to be just beside the shoulder or along the side of the calf. Rub the show stick along the calf's top line while trying to see if it will stand still. You will need a long show stick! Spending 5 to 10 minutes a day for two days rubbing the topline, the underneath side of the neck, or even scratching the belly in some cases will help improve the calf's acceptance of you in close proximity (safety first). And as importantly as anything, you, the coach, will begin to understand the personality of the calf. Not all cattle respond the same. Some calves will respond positively in just a few minutes and others may take several days to open up to the





idea. It is up to the coach to know if the calf is ready to move on to the halter and which calf would benefit from an extra day or so without introducing a halter. Remember, it can be done faster at first, but we want the best end result. This approach should make for a better show animal in the long run. The whole point of this initial contact with no halter is to desensitize the calf to people in their flight zone before introducing the additional stress of the halter. This method done properly should be safer for both the coach and the calf. Also, please note the following points:

- If a youth showman seems to be too young to be in the pen with a loose calf, they probably are.
- Do not introduce a novice showman to a loose calf that is in a stressful situation.
- Refrain from petting the head of your calf until you have a very good understanding of the animals overall temperament. This is particularly true with young exhibitors. Avoid petting the head and it will at least reduce head butting habits.

### Introducing the Halter

Now it's time to put on the halter. Make sure you have a secure place to tie in mind before applying the halter. The trainee should trust you more than it did in previous days. Applying the halter will test this trust and you can use your show stick as an extension of your arm by putting the top of the halter over the hook portion of the stick.



**Photo 1: Using the Show Stick as a Tool for Halter Placement**

Here you can hold the halter in front of the trainee's head using the show stick. Remember to hold the end of the lead with your other hand. Guide the halter over the ears of the calf while maintaining the halter on the show stick (Photo 1). Use the stick to secure the halter behind both ears (Photo 2). At this point you should have slack available in the jawline portion of the halter that can be pulled underneath the chin. Pull the lead while keeping the halter underneath the jaw with the showstick hook.



**Photo 2: Placing the Halter on the Calves Head**



Why go to all this worry? If you are successful getting the halter on the calf, the calf will hopefully understand that the handler is in control. The process so far should have been as “uneventful” as possible. Calves trained using the described process should respond more positively because they have more say in the event even though you ultimately have control in the end. You are simply guiding them as the coach in this training process. The coach or coaches should be **persistent** and **calm**. Although this method may work better in most situations, it will not be perfect and will not eliminate the frustrations associated with halter training.

At this point, you will want to tie the calf approximately 2 to 3 feet above the ground with approximately 3 feet of slack. The following are some dos and don'ts of tying a calf the first time:

#### **Do's**

- Have others nearby to observe and assist if needed.
- Be safe and plan ahead.
- The panel or gate you tie to must be completely secured. A well-built steel panel secured and well-grounded is ideal. Panels sitting on top of the ground is a dangerously, poor option.
- Watch them intently from a safe distance to check the safety of the calf. The time you will need to monitor the calf is dependent on the calf's reaction to tying.

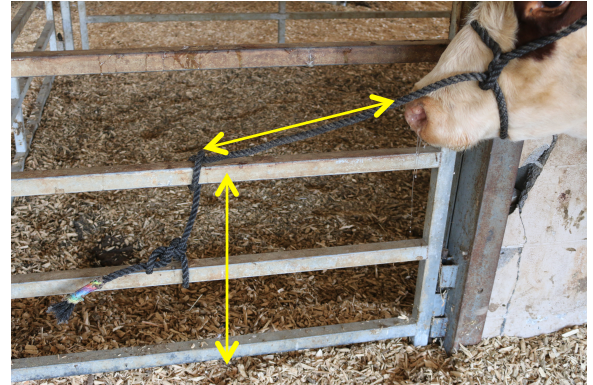


Photo 3: Appropriate Tying Method for Calf Training

#### **Don't**

- Do not tie the calf up high.
- Do not allow enough slack that they can jump over the top of the panel. This could cause choking and lead to death.
- Do not tie the rope to a direct point. Loop it around a panel bar or another solid object before securing with a slip knot. This is important if your calf needs to be untied quickly. A direct tie to a single point could be overly tight and extremely difficult to untie. Make sure if possible that the calf can be untied quickly in the case of an emergency.

Most importantly, be safe and get out of harm's way once the calf is completely tied. Once you have successfully completed 2 or 3 haltering sessions and subsequent tying periods, tie them higher so that you can begin to work the calf's hair with a brush or blower. Don't forget that the showstick is one of your best tools. Continue scratching and rubbing with the show stick until they are feeling more comfortable with you and you with them.



**Proto 4: Appropriate Tying of a Calf Already Trained to Tie**

### **Beginning the Leading Phase of Coaching**

Your next objective as a coach will be to get them to the designated wash area. This area will also need secure tying structures, and you will want to loop the halter around other panel bars before making the a secure slip knot (Photo 4). The introduction of water could cause them to pull significantly on the halter. Thus, a direct tie could be very difficult to untie particularly if the calf falls or slips. You will want to always be able to free the calf if unwanted circumstances arise. Brushing and blowing prior to wash day will help significantly. You will want their first leading and wash rack experience to be as good as possible. Leading a novice calf can be a tricky situation. The person leading should have the ability to turn the calf should they try to run past the leader. It's best to make their opportunity to run as limited as possible. Set up the barn or pens thinking of your safety and the temperament of the calf. Giving advice during this step is almost pointless as each calf and situation is different. However, make sure that the area that you want to lead to is free of debris and equipment that could cause the leader of the calf to stumble. Also, try to remove items that could scare novice calves. This requires removing pretty much

anything from the potential walking area of the calf. Prepare for the worst and expect the best.

When it's time to pull the calf with the halter, remember to give slack to the halter each time the calf steps in the correct direction. If the leader constantly pulls the entire time, the calf will not learn that moving toward the handler is beneficial. Take your time in this process. If the calf isn't running wildly, consider it a small success.

### **Removing the Halter**

Halter removal is a very important step for this method of training. Removing the halter at the end of each tying or training period will help train the calf to your expectations. Removing the halter can be difficult if the calf is in an excited state. During the first few times of halter removal keep the lead rope wrapped around the gate. The goal is to release pressure under the jaw and slide the halter out from underneath the jaw. Holding the end of the lead rope with it still wrapped to the gate, try increase the amount of slack until the jaw portion of the halter can be pulled loose enough to allow complete removal of the halter. Be patient with the calf. The best case scenario is halter removal without them realizing what is going on. The subsequent times the halter is removed it will be more difficult as they will better understand the process. Try to refrain from removal the halter until they are standing still. If you remove the halter while they are fighting and pulling, they will become more difficult to work during halter removal.

### **What to Expect Next**

As you feel more comfortable with the training process, you will see that cattle will train more



quickly as you gain more confidence and many of these processes that are mentioned in this article can have shortened time frames.

Conceivably, the experienced trainer can get one to the wash rack and blown out on day 2 or 3 with decent success. Here are a few last points to remember:

- Plan ahead and do not get in a rush. If you are in a rush, the calf will be stressed and excited.
- Work with the calf and not against it. Use the calf's point of balance and flight zone instincts.
- Be safe. Have someone close by to monitor in case one or both of you stumbles.
- Yelling and loud talking is a novice mistake. Calm, even tempered coaches will get better results.
- Each time you leave the calf with a positive experience the better. This includes the halter removal process.
- This is not the holy grail of calf training. Tailor the training process to your personal taste and environment.

Reading about training beef calves to tie, lead, and stand calmly while groomed may be difficult to visualize. Still, if the trainer applies the **concepts** within this article they should learn a great deal about the calf and animal behavior. If you should have questions about beef cattle projects, please call your local UGA Extension office.