

Halter Training Beef Cattle

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Photo: Bailey Toates, Georgia Cattlemen's Association



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If you or someone you know is planning to halter train beef cattle, remember that the calf must be coached—it will not instinctively know what to do. Good coaching equals better results. The following information focuses on how to be a good coach during the halter training process for beef cattle.

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, tying the halter to a donkey, or holding on to the halter as you release calves from the chute. The last option should be considered dangerous and only performed by very experienced handlers. In her book *Human Livestock Handling*, Temple Grandin states, “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.

The halter dragging option is popular, but it seems to delay the inevitable and can create bad habits if the calf is trained to be free to roam while wearing a halter. Although the method introduces the concept of responding with submission to the pull of the halter, 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. The calf will not be accustomed to a handler 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.

Tying the halter to a donkey may work for 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 good candidates for training.

The third method, placing the halter on the calf before releasing it from the chute while attempting to maintain control of the calf, is often problematic. This method introduces the halter and the handler 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 it requires great strength and a higher than normal skill level.

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 in the long term. Use discipline, patience, and good cattle

handling skills to build trust through the process described in the remainder of this publication. Keep in mind that some situations are difficult even in the best facilities with the best handlers. Cattle temperament can vary widely from breed to breed and even 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 showmen will benefit greatly by starting out with even-tempered, highly trainable cattle. A calf that is good phenotypically but has a poor temperament can be discouraging to the exhibitor and those assisting.

Desensitizing the calf to handlers and surroundings

Training beef calves to be haltered and led while working with their behavioral instincts can be better for the calf and rewarding for the handler. Begin this process by bringing the calf into a secure 12-by-12-foot pen with at least one additional calf in a nearby 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 when possible, although some very gentle calves may do favorably. Here are some tips for selecting a calf to train:

- Begin to train while the prospect is at a 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.

Bring the calf into the pen during the day for one or two days without doing more than feeding and occasionally cleaning the stall (three to four times in a day). This acclimation period allows the calf to feel comfortable with its surroundings and people. On the third day, or when it seems the calf you're training is settling down, enter the stall with a show stick for the purpose of getting the calf accustomed to touch. Understanding point of balance is essential for this portion of the process. As the coach, you should be positioned just beside the shoulder or along the side of the calf. Rub the show stick along

the calf's topline while trying to learn whether it will stand still. You will need a long show stick! Spending five to 10 minutes a day for two days rubbing the topline, the underside of the neck, or even scratching the belly will help improve the calf's acceptance of you in close proximity—remembering to put safety first. 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. It is up to the coach to know whether 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, the process can be done faster, but we want the best end result. A measured 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 is too young to be in the pen with a loose calf, an adult or older exhibitor should lead the halter training project.
- 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 to 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.

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



Figure 1. Use the show stick as a tool for halter placement.

halter over the ears of the calf while maintaining the halter on the show stick (Figure 1). Use the stick to secure the halter behind both ears (Figure 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 show stick hook.



Figure 2. Use the show stick to secure the halter behind both ears.

Why go to all this worry? If you successfully place the halter on the calf, the calf should understand that the handler is in control. Calves trained using the described process should respond more positively because they have more say in the event, although the handler ultimately has control. The process so far should have been as uneventful as possible. You are simply guiding the calf in this training process, and as the coach, you should be persistent and calm. Although this method often works better than others, 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 (Figure 3). The following are some dos and don'ts of tying a calf the first time.

Do:

- Have others nearby to observe and assist if needed.
- Be safe and plan ahead.
- Completely secure the panel or gate to which you tie the rope. A well-built steel panel secured and well-grounded is ideal. Do not tie novice cattle to panels that are not well secured to post.
- Watch newly tied calves intently from a safe distance. Newly tied calves can flip or get in a bind with the halter or gates in a way that can cause suffocation.
- Consider the time you will need to monitor the calf, which is dependent on the calf's reaction to tying. A calf that stands still without pulling and fighting the halter is the goal.



Figure 3. Tie the calf 2 to 3 feet above the ground with about 3 feet of slack.

Don't:

- Tie the calf up high.
- Allow enough slack that the calf could jump over the top of the panel. This could cause choking and lead to death.
- Tie the rope to a direct point. Loop it around a panel bar or another solid object before securing it 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. As best as possible, ensure that the calf can be untied quickly in an emergency.

Most importantly, be safe and get out of harm's way once the calf is completely tied. Once you have successfully completed two or three haltering sessions and subsequent tying periods, tie the calf higher so that you can begin to work its hair with a brush or blower. Don't forget that the show stick 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.



Figure 4. Loop the rope around the panel bar or another solid object before securing it with a slip knot.

Beginning the leading phase

Your next objective as a coach will be to get the calf 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 a secure slip knot (Figure 4). The introduction of water could cause the trainee to pull significantly on the halter, and 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. You will want their first leading and wash rack experience to be as good as possible, and brushing and blowing prior to wash day should help significantly.

Leading a novice calf can be tricky. The person leading should have the ability to turn the calf should they try to run past the leader. It's best to limit their opportunity to run. A young exhibitor is not the best option for the first few trips to the wash rack, in most cases. Set up the barn or pens thinking of your safety and the temperament of the calf. Although each calf and situation is different, leading in a barn with the exterior gates closed is ideal. Remember, the calf should already be accustomed

to handlers and the halter, which should improve the first few times leading. 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. This requires removing as many items as possible from the potential walking area of the calf, including blowers, fans, garden hoses, and stall forks. Also, remove anything in the immediate area that could scare novice calves such as an ATV or other equipment. Unusual objects can hinder calves from walking in the desired direction. 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 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. If the first leading time was a washing event at a washing area, the calf may be very anxious to return to the stall. As always, the walkway should be cleared with access to the desired tying area. The person leading will need to be able to have leverage on the calf should the calf move past the handler on the way to the tying area.

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, and removing the halter can be difficult if the calf is in an excited state. Keep the lead rope wrapped around the gate the first few times you remove the halter. 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, 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 removing the halter without the calf realizing what is going on. Subsequent halter removals will be more difficult as the calf will better understand the process. Try to refrain from removing the halter until the calf is standing still. If you remove the halter while the calf is fighting and pulling, the calf will become more difficult to work with during halter removal. A well-trained calf is trained to putting on and removing the halter.

What to expect next

Cattle will train more quickly when the handler feels more comfortable with the training process. With more confidence, many of these processes may have shortened time frames. Conceivably, the experienced trainer can get a calf to the wash rack and blown out on day two or three with reasonable success. Here are a few final 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.
- Scratching with a show stick and applying the halter in the stall is a great way to learn the calf's flight zone and behavior.
- Be safe. Have someone close by to monitor in case the handler and/or calf stumbles.
- Yelling and loud talking is a novice mistake. Calm, even-tempered coaches will get better results.
- The more often 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.
- Shortcuts delay the inevitable.

It may be difficult to visualize the entire process from an article. Still, applying the concepts within this publication should help handlers learn a great deal about the calf and animal behavior. If you have questions about this process or other beef cattle projects, contact your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office.

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