

## **Working Cattle the Natural Way: “The Weaning Process”**

by Herman Detering

Most ranchers would agree that weaning is one of the most stressful times in working with cattle. Not only is it a shock to the cow and the calf, but it adds stress to the rancher who often has to deal with distraught calves that won't eat or drink, who are prone to become sick, or at least lose significant amounts of weight. In addition, this stressful situation is often compounded by dehorning, branding, and inoculations. In brief, this is a critical period in the life of a calf, but also one that also affords the rancher his best chance to affect the calf's temperament, for better or worse, by the kind of procedures he uses.

### **Before Weaning**

Where do we start in helping the calf through this process? We should begin before the calf is born or while the calf is still on the cow. We need to handle the mother in a low-stress way so she does not regard us as a threat, so that she will tolerate our presence in a pen while she is with her calf. A gentle cow is your best ally in producing a gentle calf. Calmness on her part will tend to be passed on to her calf.

As for the calves, it is helpful to separate them from their mothers for increasingly long periods of time. At around three months, I routinely do this when I bring my cattle to the pens for feeding. This should be an easy process. As you know, cows will willingly leave their calves if not forced to under pressure. We all see this happen on a daily basis in the pasture.

Then, work with the calves while they are temporarily separated from their mothers. Put feed out and advance and retreat from the trough to try to draw them in. Move them gently from one pen to another. Have them walk by you in a 15-foot alleyway until they can do so calmly. Walk towards individual calves and stand on the space where the calf was standing; he will learn from this not only to yield to you but that you are not going to chase him.

Whatever you can do in this regard will help you when weaning day comes. Focus on minimizing the flight impulse and maximizing curiosity and sociability. The goal is to make weaning as much of a “non-event” as possible.

If there is one word that low-stress stockmen use in this regard it is “preparation.” Preparation for any handling task is vital to achieve low-stress results.

### **Weaning Day & After**

Weaning day should begin and proceed as any other day, with the calm separation of the calves into a familiar pen. Once separated, they should be allowed to remain in “fence line” contact with their mothers but prevented from nursing. If you have prepared them properly your work at this point should be minimal. In seven years of weaning I have never had a sick calf or one that refused to eat or drink. However, it is best to check them several times a day to see that they are eating, drinking, and moving around. If they are not, don't try to drive them to the food and water but simply occupy the space in the pen away from the food. This will encourage them to move to the area where they can eat and drink.

Weaning day procedure is quite different if the calves have just arrived from a salebarn or from a place where they might have experienced stressful handling. Here preventive care is called for to help avoid sickness or even death. Several times a day you need to move calmly among the calves, giving them a focus and moving them around the pen. You need to diffuse the stress they arrived with. Left to their own, stressed-out calves may well give up, lie down, and simply die. To minimize this possibility, you should frequently move them around until they are eating and drinking in a normal way. Whatever you do, don't

just leave them on their own. If they do make it without illness, it could still take about a month to get them back to their weaning weight.

Also, I usually put the calves with several older heifers which serve as “baby sitters.” Using all of these techniques, I am able to move the weaning process forward quickly, get them out on grass, and not be concerned about matching my feed to what they had before. Likewise, any medication that may be used at this time will be more effective if the calf is experiencing minimal stress.

As pointed out recently by Todd McCartney, Director of Education for the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, a low-stress approach to weaning is part of the current industry focus on “good stewardship” of both the land and the cattle.

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