

The Heifer Whisperer

Reprinted from the August 1998 article in “Georgia Cattleman” magazine written by Calvin Alford.

The “Heifer Whisperer” is the moniker Drew Denman gave to his aunt Beth Daniel. The name derives from Beth’s technique in halter breaking calves. Beth’s kinder, gentler methods work so I set out to learn the secrets and began by interviewing Mrs. Beth.

The original idea or concept came from Teela Sadowsky, her husband is a horse trainer, and I suppose the idea originated from him. Kevin Saunders was using this approach breaking colts at Middle Tennessee State University and kept after me to try it on calves. Credibility was added by my good friend Kelly Postin who kept telling me about a new and better way to halter break.

After breaking calves for thirty years, it is hard to admit to or conceive of being wrong. This new method is based on common sense, working with calves and not against them, establishing trust and out smarting the calves. It is so much easier and quicker. Rick Stephenson calls it the voodoo method.

The ideal situation is for the calf to grow up in a stress free environment where neither she nor her mama is cowboied, chased, dogged, prodded, etc. When weaned, I personally want to feed the calves to be broken. I want the calves to transfer dependence from their mama to me. I want the calves to look forward to seeing me when I feed.

I use a 12’ x 12’ square pen to start the process. A round one would be best since there are no corners, but you know Randy’s spending habits. I put the heifer in the 12 x 12 pen and armed only with a show stick, I move to the middle of the pen, and with this small pen, they are never out of show stick reach. When the heifer slows, take the show stick and scratch her shoulder. I think cattle respond to voice tones so I talk to them constantly. It usually takes about five minutes of rubbing down their top, belly, shoulders, and under their tail head before they will stand still, and I start the haltering procedure. Use a halter with a “big eye splice” on the drawstring side and an extra long lead. Most times we tie two halters together. In this small pen and with a long lead rope they never get away. I use my show stick to aid in haltering. Keep pressure on the halter, but don’t try to stop them. If they are fighting and slinging their heads, you’re pulling too hard. Slight, constant pressure is the secret and the minute they give to pressure, release and give them their head. Then move in and start scratching. Start on or around their tail head. If they move away, put pressure on the halter until they “whoa”. When they stop, go through the process of scratching again. Nine out of ten will stop and let you scratch them. I think the secret is we are not making them stop. They want to and we are gaining their trust. We are imprinting that we are not going to hurt them. This scratching, communicating, and imprinting session lasts 15 – 20 minutes.

Most times, thirty minutes after beginning the process, we are ready to lead. Get on the end of this long, fifteen-foot rope. Get out of the calf’s space. Now apply a little pressure. When you get a response, even a slight one, release the pressure. Never hold constant pressure. After about fifteen minutes and we’ve got the slight pressure then response, then release and quit for the day.

Day 2. The good thing about this method is the heifer didn’t forget Day 1’s lessons since it was a pleasant experience. Repeat the scratch, halter, pressure, release, lead—all in the small pen. After the thirty-minute session you’re ready to tie her up. Tie straight in at eye level and give 18 to 20 inches of

slack. I know this gives them enough rope to flip over, twist and turn, but they have to learn to give to pressure. This slack in the rope is a release valve. After tying them up, get away. I don't want them associating me with this process.

Two days and we can have young cattle tied up, leading and still have skin on our hands. No wonder Rick named it the "voodoo". If you want recommendations on this method ask Blaine Danner. I hear he broke 48 out of 50 Limousin heifers using a variation of this method. Pretty good batting average, I think.

Photo captions:

#1 Getting to know your calf! Scratching the animal with a show stick gentles them and is an excellent bonding tool.

#2 A show stick is used to hang a halter. Take your time and be calm. Remember you don't have to force it on.

#3 Scratching while holding the loose halter is a further bonding and gentling process.

#4 It can't be stressed enough, let them get to know you and you'll learn from your calf as well. If the calf moves away, give a little resistance and when he/she responds, reward the giving slack in the halter and start back scratching.

#5 When the animal acknowledges your request, reward them with the release of pressure. Don't continue to drag the calf. This teaches them "you ask me to come and I'll be glad to".

#6 Pull gently on the halter and ask your calf to lead. Don't force them. Don't get too close and he'll be less likely to run or be afraid of you.