

Cattle Business in Mississippi – May 2007
“Stocker Cents” article

Incorporating a Horse into your Cattle Operation to Increase Profitability

Preston Buff, MSU Extension Equine Specialist

In recent decades many cattle producers have moved away from the use of horses in their operations with the advent of four-wheelers and other motorized equipment. This modernization in the cattle industry has afforded producers the luxury of being able to turn a key and go work cattle. However, this advancement in technology may not be as beneficial to our bottom line as we may think. University studies have illustrated that increased levels of stress in animals negatively affect animal health and production. During the great cattle drives of the late 1800's stockmen trailed cattle for 10 to 15 miles per day. By moving cattle calmly they were able to maintain or increase body weight in these animals on the trail. In his 1903 book, *The Log of a Cowboy*, Andy Adams quoted stockman Jim Flood as saying: 'Boys the secret to trailing cattle is to never let your herd know that they are under restraint. Let everything that is done be done voluntarily by the cattle'. With this philosophy a crew of 20 men could effectively move 3000 cattle on horseback for 1000 miles.

The use of motorized equipment can increase stress levels in cattle, especially when the operator is working cattle in a way that excites the herd. Any time we are working cattle we need to think about the profitability of our operation and improvements we can make to our management to improve the bottom line. Low stress cattle handling can increase profitability in any operation. Using a horse in place of a four-wheeler is one way to reduce stress when working cattle. On September 14 and 15, 2007 producers will have the opportunity to learn about low stress cattle handling during the Master Stockman Program held at Mississippi State University. The program will include low stress cattle handling on horseback and on foot. Curt Pate, nationally recognized stockman, will be conducting the low stress cattle handling portion of the program. Additionally, program participants will have an opportunity to bring their horses and work with Curt Pate on their horsemanship skills.

Horses are not suited to all cattle producers, such as those whose age or health limits their ability to ride. However, some operations could benefit from the inclusion of horses for checking and working cattle. Horses can be beneficial in gathering cattle in pastures where obstacles prevent motorized vehicles from going into certain areas. There are many pastures where you can get to places with a horse that cannot be reached with a four-wheeler. Being on the back of a horse gives you a higher vantage point, which enables you see further. Additionally, when on horseback you can move around cattle more quietly and change directions quicker than with a four-wheeler. Your horse can see a cow that is trying to protect her calf and move out of the way. It is more difficult to move out of the way of a cow or charging bull on a four-wheeler.

When deciding to include a horse into your cattle operation there are several things you should consider. First, you must assess your riding ability to determine what level of training a horse needs so that you can successfully utilize a horse. A good rule of thumb for selecting a horse is to match a rider with little experience with a horse with much experience. Often time's people overestimate their riding ability and buy a horse requiring a more experienced rider. In these cases people are unable to get the desired outcome from their horse and quickly become frustrated. Second, you need to determine what you plan to do with a horse. Do you want to use a horse to ride out and check you cattle? Are you planning on using a horse to gather cattle or move them from pasture to pasture? Do you plan to rope and tag calves or rope and treat sick cattle in the pasture? By determining what you plan to do with a horse will help you decide what type of horse you need. Once you have decided what you want to do with a horse you need to find the right horse for your operation. There are many ranches that use horses in their cattle operation that breed and train horses for ranch work. Horses from these operations are generally bred to withstand the demands of daily ranch work. Horses that have worked in feedyards and stockyards often make good horses to use on farms and ranches. Many pen riders will purchase young horses and train them in the feedyards to sell later. When looking for a horse it is ideal to see the horse work cattle. In addition, you should test ride the horse to ensure that it can do what you need.

A horse is one way to cover ground effectively and do it quietly to help reduce the stress when working cattle. Cattle that have not seen horses before may be startled the first time they see a horse. It is important that you gradually introduce the horse to your herd by slowly riding around the outside of their flight zone. This is the area that the animals are comfortable with the presence of something new and will not move away. As cattle accept the presence of the horse the flight zone will become smaller and you will be able to ride closer. For more information on improved cattle handling techniques see; *The Cattle Industry's Guidelines for the Care and Handling of Cattle*, which is available from the Mississippi State University Extension Service. When working cattle, whether on horseback, four-wheeler or on foot, we need to focus on minimizing the stress to the animals. By doing this we can increase profitability by increasing animal performance and we can feel good at the end of the day about the work that we do. For more information on stocker cattle production, contact your local Extension office.