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PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FEEDYARD COWBOY: PLAY IT SAFE

No matter how much horsemanship experience a feedyard cowboy has, working cattle in that environment is far different from working them on the range.

Identifying pen rider safety principles is one of the aims of Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (CS-CASH). This University of Nebraska Medical Center group (https://www.unmc.edu/publichealth/feedyard/) is conducting two research projects (funded by National Institutes of Occupational Safety and Health) that are designed to make a positive impact on the sustainability of cattle feedyards through increased safety and health efforts.

Both cattle and horses react differently in a feedyard setting than most people expect. There are also unique hazards in a feedyard that all cowboys need to keep in mind.

When cattle are confined in an area, some of them react differently there than in more open spaces. More flighty cattle tend to become agitated in a confined space. Since they have nowhere else to go, they may fight. Other cattle, if they become bored, may attempt to play with the cowboy or the horse. Both situations can set the stage for an accident. To help alleviate these hazards, take time to know what types of cattle you're working with.

Practicing low-stress cattle handling principles can greatly reduce the chance that an animal will fight. Low-stress handling also makes an entire group of cattle easier to manage. Use cattles' natural herding instinct and their flight zones to make feedyard work easier for you and your horse.

One significant hazard in a feedyard is the hard surface often created in pens by lack of vegetation and mud and dust control. When a small amount of moisture is added to the pen area, either by rainfall or the cattle, the hard surface can quickly become very slick.

Keeping adequate shoes on your horse and allowing them enough time to slow down when working in the pen helps reduce potential for accident or injury. Shoeing preferences differ by rider, however adequate shoes will cause a horse to be more confident in their footing and less apt to be nervous or panic.

Borium added to shoes allows a horse to gain sure footing on some fairly slick surfaces where they would otherwise be uncomfortable.

Other feedyard hazards include weather, mud, snow, rain, cold, heat, and dust. Broken concrete, debris in a pen or work alley, leaking water tanks, and gates that don't function properly are other common everyday hazards. Any hazard that can be fixed or resolved should be reported to the appropriate person and handled as soon as possible.

Whether a cowboy selects a horse or a mule to work with, the animal must be fitted with appropriate shoes and properly prepared for the work they're expected to do. In addition to completing many hours of riding, each feedyard horse or mule must be exposed to varying levels of pressure when working around cattle and in confined spaces. A young animal may be adequately prepared for significant time under the saddle, but unprepared for a charging calf, or cattle that turn back in a working alley.

Horses and mules also need adequate rest between work days so they don't experience mental fatigue and burn out.

Feedyard policy requires approval of a horse prior to using it in the yard. The process should include ensuring it approaches a gate properly, works its way through a pen full and cattle, and is easily kept under control by the rider.

Even though a horse meets these requirements, riders must constantly be on the lookout for signs that a horse is having a bad day or is responding poorly to a given situation.

One cowboy, who worked his three-year-old horse for about eight months before bringing it to the feedyard, had completed the initial approval process and was using quality tack and equipment. The horse had been working in the yard for about three weeks.

When the pair began gathering pulls in a drover's alley, the cattle turned back on them. The horse was already positioned crossways in the alley, a sign that it was upset by the cattle. When a calf bumped into it, the horse started bucking.

The cowboy's hoodie got hung up on the saddle before he was finally thrown free. He sustained severe head injuries that required surgery.

This is a good illustration of the experience both a horse and rider need before working in a feedyard. Often, there are numerous contributing factors to an accident. If just one factor can be recognized, the chain of events leading up to the accident can be eliminated and the accident can be prevented.

Earlier that day, other riders noticed that the horse had been acting up and seemed excitable. While horses must be exposed to new experiences and riders can't let them bluff their way out of a situation, it's not acceptable to let a horse get to the point of injuring either the rider or itself.

Both the rider and his teammates should have recognized that the horse either wasn't a good fit for the work or wasn't in condition to work or experience a new situation that day. It's also true that some horses just don't belong in a feedyard.

Unsafe behaviors rather than unsafe conditions are often at the root of an accident. Learning and practicing good habits can help prevent accidents.

While pride in a job well done is an admirable thing, feedyard workers should be careful not to let pride get in the way of safety. Veteran feedyard cowboys are often paired with new riders because they are more adept at recognizing hazardous situations than a less experienced colleague. Younger workers can greatly benefit from the mentoring veteran cowboys can offer.

It only takes a second to change a life forever. Take those few seconds to make sure your work is safe and always think before you act.

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