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PEN RIDER SAFETY GUIDELINES

When a pen rider learns how to read cattle and calmly guide his capable, confident horse in the right direction at just the right time, this effective team will safely execute their daily duties. The duo will also have a positive impact on the overall safety of the feedyard.

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 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.

“Even more important for that pen rider than knowing how to read cattle is the desire to improve that skill every day,” Kevin Dwyer, manager of

Sellers Feedyard in Lyons, Kansas, says. “At first, pen riders are more reactionary, responding to what a cow does or something that happens. If they’re around the feedyard long enough, they start finding ways to think about what the cows are thinking and how to head off things before they happen.”

Dwyer emphasizes that any feedyard has some stress from any one of numerous factors that impact the industry: weather, markets, etc. However, many elements that trigger stress in cattle can be minimized by skilled pen riders.

Among the most desired traits of pen riders are the ability to move quickly without agitating their horse or the animals around them. Stamina, ability to think on their feet and a desire to constantly add to their stock handling abilities are all important attributes.

“It may sound corny, but one trait of highly skilled stockman is empathy for the animals around them and the desire to see them content and healthy,” Dwyer says. “The best stockmen don’t hesitate to put the animals’ needs above their own. Someone who cringes when they see an animal slip and fall, they have what it takes to become a good stockman.”

While skilled stockmen who possess a high degree of horsemanship are a winning combination, Dwyer believes acquiring the ability to manage livestock comes first. Once a stockman understands how to influence cattle to maintain a calm, peaceable atmosphere, learning to work with a horse can be accomplished.

In 99% of feedyard mishaps, speed is a common denominator. Dwyer doesn’t allow loping or galloping through alleyways or pens because a “flat-footed walk” will take pen riders where they need to go without stressing the cattle.

“Our pen riders have learned how to find alternatives to speed and still get things done when they need to respond,” Dwyer says. “When pen riders and horses move in a calm way, both cattle and employees experience lower stress levels and are happier overall. When the cattle do better, our customers do better, employees do better, even the facility benefits because we don’t have agitated animals hammering on fences and gates.”

Dwyer notes that livestock handling activities which may be typical in a branding or rodeo setting won’t work well in the feedyard.

“I’ll take a good stockman over a cowboy every time,” he says.

Another important pen rider attribute is honesty. Traditionally, ranching families have encouraged this trait in youth, however, with changing times come changing values.

“In my world, nothing ranks higher on the totem pole than honesty and integrity,” Dwyer says. “I want my pen riders to know that, whatever happened, I expect them to be honest about it and we’ll work through it. Every industry needs that.”

Successful feedyard horses will first of all be durable, large-boned and big feet. Their soundness aids riders in confidently moving through the feedyard as necessary. Before horses are ready to take on the responsibilities of working at a feedyard, they must attain mental and physical maturity. They must trust their rider, have experience with a multitude of situations without succumbing to panic, and not break down physically when completing tasks.

As with the cattle, the most successful pen riders empathize with their horse.

“Horses aren’t a piece of equipment like a four-wheeler,” Dwyer says. “The work our pen riders do

is all horseback. The best feedyard horses are low key, level headed. Riders don't have to hold them back all the time and they don't blow up if they're cornered. You seldom see a horse in the feedyard that's under four years old. They're not ready for the pressures they'll face here."

Horses that are "always looking for the next boulder to fall on them" won't fare well in the feedyard. While cattle are generally quiet, there are slamming gates, the sounds of semi-trucks coming and going and the noise of back-up alerts on vehicles.

Feedyard horses have to be comfortable with opening and closing gates, sorting a single animal out of a pen, pushing a load of cattle down an alleyway or standing quietly while their rider takes care of something. They may work in mud up to their hocks or spend time on ground as hard as concrete.

Because cattle need care in every kind of weather, they are used in rain, snow, sleet, etc.

"Once in a while they may get poked in the rib by a gate handle or a steer," Dwyer says. "They can't come unglued."

Pen riders at Sellers Feedyard often have three or four horses and alternate between them over the year to help avoid undue stress or physical injury.

"It's important for pen riders to learn that there's no shame in backing up or backing off when necessary," Dwyer says. "For cowboys, that might be difficult. In the feedyard, it's the better part of valor to take pressure off the cattle and find an alternative way to accomplish a task rather than press into a disaster. When the pen rider stays in the right frame of mind, their horse and the cattle will act that way, too."

Horsemanship principles are offered through safety seminars so pen riders learn how to safely work with their horse. Dwyer says individuals who are willing to pursue the necessary skills to effectively work in a feedyard will find plenty of available positions.

“When feedyard managers sit down to talk, it doesn’t take 10 minutes for them to start discussing the shortage of labor in the industry,” Dwyer says. “Solid stockmanship skills and the desire to keep learning stock handling skills are in demand.”

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