



Photo courtesy of Kim Nikodym.

Cattle Docility & Safety

I think that everyone wants their cattle to be happy to see them. Or at least, happy to see the feed truck. However, this is not always the case. The U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention reported the results of a research study indicating that an average of 21 human deaths a year occur by bovines, typically due to stomping or goring. This study also tells us that horses are lethal too, with an average of 20 human deaths annually. So, what are some of the things that we can do to ensure these types of statistics do not visit our family ranch? With this article we are going to hit the following topics: Docility, Handling Systems, Human Behavior, Cattle Behavior and then close with a discussion about General Ranch Safety.

DOCILITY

If you have ever thought about Docility, you have probably never thought through how it is measured. The Beef Improvement Federation Guidelines provides us with a way to measure Docility as part of a study they did. Their Code Description is: 1-Docile, 2-Restless, 3-Nervous, 4-Flighty, 5-Aggressive, 6-Very Aggressive.

Let me summarize their study for you. By using (1-Docile) bulls they were able to bring the calf crops, of several years, closer to the lower scores of (1-Docile) and (2-Restless) while using cows in the 4-6 range. Not exactly the most scientific study I have read, but there was some obvious genetic correlation documented in their results. I had to wonder about the environment that the calves were raised in. So, does the environment that cattle are raised in impact their docility scoring? I would argue that "Yes" environmental factors have a large part to play.

Many Longhorn breeders take great care at weaning time to ensure that their calves are started off right, in an environment that will foster a more docile animal, producing a lower docility score. This can be done by halter breaking, or just by having significant human interaction immediately post weaning.

Let me share my thoughts; Docility is the way cattle behave when being handled by humans or put in an unusual environment. Poor Docility can be attributed to a survival instinct and a desire to escape their current situation. So, with that, you can see how an early



Docility is an important trait, especially when it's time to move or work the cattle. Photo courtesy of GCR Longhorns.

program that takes weaned calves and puts them in an environment that they consider safe would have a measurable positive impact on docility.

From the National AG Safety Database, there are studies that show Docility is a relatively heritable trait, couple this with a positive environment and you too can have more docile cattle. Docility (DOC) is also looked at in some commercial breeds. It is a measured Expected Progeny Differences (EPD). It is the quantification of an animal's temperament, nervousness and flightiness when handled. Docility is important in your cattle herds and specifically in the bulls that you use.

HANDLING SYSTEMS

Longhorn cattle have a strong territorial instinct, building a sense of home in the pens, corrals and pastures that they live in. An example of this would be the paths taken around water, often over decades, wearing paths into the pasture. Given this instinct, it is understandable that animals often hesitate when going through unfamiliar handling situations. Whether it is branding, vaccines or some other reason; cattle will likely have had an unpleasant experience in cattle chutes at some point in their lives. Again, their hesitation to handling equipment is understandable.

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The difference between Texas Longhorns and most other cattle is in the name (Longhorns). It is vital to a Longhorn breeder that you have an adequate handling facility for both human and animal safety. There are, of course, chutes and pen systems designed for Texas Longhorn cattle. Of these many Longhorn designs there are some similarities that include not trying to shove a 70" Tip-To-Tip cow down a 2-foot-wide path into a standard commercial headgate.

Longhorn chute designs tend to allow the animal to enter from the side of the chute, with open areas for the horns to protrude. The Joe Chute, P&C Longhorn Cage, and the Bry Chute are a few that come to mind, there are of course other manufacturers as well. Pen systems leading up to the Longhorn chute of your own choosing are also important. I would encourage you to do your own homework in this area as well, ArrowQuip and Go-Bob Pipe and Steel are a couple of additional resources available to you to design and build a safe pen system.

A possible design element to consider, given the maternal instinct of cows, it is best to keep their calves as close to the adult as possible during handling. When working your cattle, even in a well-designed system, it is important to recognize that you are statistically in the danger zone.



A Longhorn chute makes performing necessary routine care, as well as medical treatment, much safer and calmer for both handler and animal. Photo courtesy of GCR Longhorns.

HUMAN BEHAVIOR

I want to start this section of the article with some interesting and possibly disturbing statistics from the CDC study mentioned earlier in this article. Of the average 21 human deaths attributed to cattle, discussed above, 20 were to Males while 1 Female human death was reported on average. The number one activity (33%) leading to human death was "Tending/Treating in enclosed area". The second deadliest activity was reported as, "Herding/Moving/Sorting" (24%). Age was also a formidable factor; 33% of deaths were to people above age 60, while 67% were younger than 60.

It is critically important to maintain strong situational awareness of what is going on around you when working cattle and statistics would indicate that a person's age is also a factor. The older we get the less likely we are to be able to escape a dangerous situation, think about that for a moment! Perhaps it is why fewer deaths

occurred with a wiser/older generation. Moving right along; not all injuries are obviously fatal.

Would you believe that one of the most frequent non-fatal injuries reported was foot injuries? - makes sense to me. How many of us do not wear Safety Shoes or Boots when working cattle? Yes, there are some people I am directing this comment to (no names). Human error and failure to adequately prepare are the primary reasons for most types of accidents (not the animals).

To give you something to think about, what is the cause of these errors in judgement? I would argue that the human physical, psychological and physiological factors play a large role. Humans can get careless, upset, tired, hurried and numerous other factors. What can we do to minimize risks?

Although handling methods vary greatly, here are a few generally accepted rules when working cattle: animals will respond to routine; be calm and deliberate; avoid quick movements and loud noises; be patient; don't fear - but respect livestock, and, most importantly, always have an escape route with animals in an enclosed area.

CATTLE BEHAVIOR

The famous Temple Grandin, Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University, warned; "The bull that's going to kill you is the hand-fed, bucket calf. It will be dangerous when it grows up. If you want a safe bull, let the cow raise it!"

Well, now that I have your attention, I am sure that there is something to be said for her opinion about hand feeding. The concern is that young bottle babies have no boundaries with the human provider. There is a shift in the normal caretaker dependency relationship between the calf and the caretaker, and a caretaker must maintain the dominant role. I have seen this in my own experience, and I am sure that you can say the same if you have ever raised a 'Bottle Baby'. Please be aware of Temple's warning and take it into consideration and maintain safe boundaries with your 'Bottle Babies'.

This next part should not be news to any, but cows with calves are a safety concern. If a cow was "Protective" of this year's calf, it is a safe bet that she will be that way her whole life. I have what I call "50 Yard Mommas", and I do not get too close when they have a new calf on the ground. First calf heifers can also be particularly dangerous, and it just is not worth it to find out if that calf is

a bull or heifer (safety first!). She will bring the new baby around soon enough.

Obviously, a bull, even a docile bull, can be dangerous when he has breeding on his mind. Of the CDC reported average 21 human deaths a year that occur by bovines 48% were attributed to interactions with bulls. Colorado State University has published an article correlating cattle behavior with profitability, as this is more of a Longhorn article, their math does not directly apply. But their rational works; flighty and aggressive cattle are not happy in their environment and therefore eat less and do not reach their genetic potential. Getting your animals to their genetic potential should be your goal.

GENERAL RANCH SAFETY

Human nature is not to do things the safest way possible. Sure, you would think that it is, but it is not. We generally, in our own minds, accept risk in every facet of our lives. Why do we do this? Simple, we balance safety with many other factors - mostly timeliness and ease. Other times we just do our routine and what did not hurt us last time will not hurt us this time (right)? We just do not consider safety. If I walked onto your ranch, or if you walked onto mine, we would each find things that are both unsafe and haven't hurt anyone yet. But think about it, is the time for action before or after an incident? I am not asking you to put your "Safety Inspector" hat on and walk around your ranching operation, but maybe once in a while think about safety (and only safety) for a moment. For me, I know that broken hay ring in one of my pastures needs to come out. I also know that the way

I have some panels stacked has not hurt anyone yet, but it could. An honest inspection of your ranch will prevent injuries if you act. Other things to consider on the ranch; do not become a statistic! Tractors cause between one third and one half of fatalities on America's farms and ranches. Another disheartening fact is that children are injured at an alarming rate while farming and ranching - so, be careful and supervise.

I would like to end this article by asking that you consider how all these individual

subjects come together, Docility, Handling Systems, Cattle and Human behavior to produce Ranch Safety. I think that each of these subjects could be the most important on any given day, but together they build upon each other to develop a Longhorn Cattle Ranch that you can be proud of. As always, Ranch Safely!



ALWAYS BE CAREFUL around a cow with a new calf, especially first calf heifers. Not all cows welcome your attention. Photo courtesy of Nik Nikodym.