

One Fun Way to Get Your Members Prepared for Cattle Work Without Cattle.

It may be challenging to find good cattle to work with and when you do it's nice to have some preparation behind you. You will find it helpful to work with someone who understands good stockmanship and can pass that knowledge on. Far too often I see people moving cattle in a big hurry, yes I see it in Working Equitation too. Getting to where we can move cattle faster will come with time but learning some of the following skills will prepare you for a successful experience. A wise cattleman once told me that if I want to move cattle and I'm in a hurry that I'd best be prepared to move real slow. That was good advice. Too much pressure and cattle will evade us successfully. We would like to approach cattle in a way that works for them. Doing so "can" also set us up for building greater trust with our horses as well as our team mates.

The positioning of the horse as well as the rider's position (body language) can be key to success. There are times when driving cattle with your horse's ribcage can be less troubling to the animal than facing straight towards them. There are other times when I might back toward a cow to create movement. This might be done in an effort to avoid the head on energy or just because of the position my horse is already in. Developing the skill of reading a cow and knowing the direction she is planning to go before her feet move is a huge advantage to any rider. These are just a few things to think about, but now I'd like to focus on a few more things to do in preparation for the live work.

Let's take a look at some movements including some dressage moves we are practicing and how they can be used in preparation. If you are teaching a group of folks or you are just friendly riders wanting to prepare for cattle work, here are some more things to work on.

Cattle often feel too much pressure with that head-on "push". Using Leg Yielding or Sidepass can be a great tool to get them moving (i.e. driving with the ribcage). You may even practice sideways movement with rearward movement depending on the desired outcome. Being capable of immediately changing the direction of the sideways movement is a must. Think, pressure on, pressure off, sometimes very snappy. For this you may have only an imaginary cow to work with but to make it even more fun, have another rider fill in as a cow doing their best to react like a cow. Another fun option just to get good at practicing the subtleties of movement, try this on foot. One of you as a horse, and another person as a cow. Before this exercise is over I guarantee that many of you will be wondering if you could get your horse to be as handy with his feet as you are finding you need to be. Dressage again.

More things to become proficient at...

Being capable of stopping your horse straight and promptly without having to pull, but rather signaling with your seat and balance.

Walking very slowly, or walking very fast.

Shifting your horse's shoulders left or right, with a picking up of and replacing the front foot, then with just a shifting of the shoulders left or right, without the feet leaving the ground, a gentle rocking only. Now work the hindquarters the same way. These subtle movements are very handy for working cattle.

There are times when you'd like to change direction of your horse while putting as little pressure as possible on that cow that is in front of you. A turning on the hindquarters in Dressage would typically cause a forward pressure towards the cow. For this exercise we might be interested in using a turn on the hindquarters where our horse is stepping back to make the turn. As you will see with a cutting horse. This should remove any forward pressure and actually take any pressure away, encouraging the cow to stay put.

These have been just a few ideas that come to mind for cow-less cow working.

As you progress with these ideas, think of other movements you are working on in your horsemanship that might be useful for moving cattle and try them out with your riding partners.

Let me know how these ideas work for you. If you have questions I'd love to hear from you. Perhaps one day we will ride together. I'm looking forward to that. Most of all have fun with this. The way I see it, you can't do it wrong if you're having fun.

Happy Trails...

Robert Phinney

Walla Walla Valley Working Equitation