

# Good stock dogs minimize stress on cattle, people

By GAIL C. KECK

**W**HEN Scott Pfeiffer goes to separate one of his bulls from his herd of Shorthorn cows, he doesn't need a corral or a crew of cowboys. Instead, he depends on his stock dogs.

They can calmly persuade his cattle to move where he wants them.

"You give them the option to go on the trailer," he explains. "They go on the trailer to get away from the dog."

## Stop yelling

Pfeiffer, who farms with his wife near Albany, Ohio, says the dogs can do what few people can: "move cattle without all the yelling and screaming and banging." That's better for the cattle — and for the people.

"The dogs allow you to decrease all the pressure and the stress," Pfeiffer says. "It can actually save your marriage."

Maybe he's exaggerating just a little, but there's no question that a dog with the right instincts and training can

make cattle handling much less stressful for humans, too.

For John Lavelle, stock dogs are indispensable. "I wouldn't have cattle if I didn't have a good dog, now that I've experienced it," he says.

Lavelle became fascinated with stock dogs when he spent a summer on a Pinedale, Wyo., ranch as a teenager. The rancher, Grant

Beck, could stand on his porch and send his dog, Ladd, to the field to bring in the remuda of horses for each day's activities, Lavelle recalls. He also used his dog for pack trips up into the mountains. With the dog, it only took a few riders to guide a string of 20 horses and pack mules up the road and through town.

"As we passed through the city of Pinedale, if any of the mules would duck down a side street, Ladd would instinctively proceed after them and bring them back to the main road," Lavelle says.

Now Lavelle raises stock dogs himself and uses them to help handle his herd of black Angus cattle on his farm near New Marshfield, Ohio. He rarely needs the help of another person to help round up or doctor his cattle.

## Replace the children

Sue Rayburn, who runs a cow-calf herd near Morgantown, W.V., relies on her dogs for cattle-handling help when her husband is away at his off-farm job. She used to depend on her four children, but she says, "all



**DOG ADDICT:** John Lavelle is so married to the efficacy and cattle-handling ease his stock dogs provide that he says he wouldn't keep cattle without stock dogs to help. He uses both corder collies and Hangin' Tree cowdogs.

of a sudden I realized the kids are all gone."

If nothing else, dogs can save a lot of legwork, explains Rayburn. She sometimes sends her dogs after stragglers in the far corners of her hilly pastures. The dogs also help direct the cattle through the gates when they need to move across a paved road from one pasture to another.

Rayburn used to dread some of her cattle-handling chores before she got her dogs. "They make a big difference in my attitude," she says.

## Training the trainers

To help spread the word about low-stress livestock handling with stock dogs, John Lavelle and Scott Pfeiffer started the Buckeye Cow Dog Association in 2005. Lavelle regularly hosts training clinics for the association at his farm.

Clinic participants include those who are training their dogs to compete in dog trials as well as working ranchers and farmers who are training their dogs to help with day-to-day livestock handling. Either way, the handlers and dogs need to learn the same basic principles, Lavelle says.

First, handlers need to give up any "cowboy hurry-up mentality" says rancher and dog trainer Elvin Kopp, who led a recent clinic. Kopp uses stock dogs and cutting horses to manage the 2,500 head of cattle on his own ranch near

Westerose, Alberta.

For dogs to be effective, they and their handlers need to understand livestock flight zones, Kopp stresses. For example, to get a cow moving, a dog moves into her flight zone. If the cow is heading the right direction, the dog needs to relieve some of the pressure on the flight zone. That way the cow wants to move in that direction because she realizes that pressure from the dog will be relieved.

"The dog needs to know to stand its ground if the cow challenges him, but to allow relief if the cow is going the right way," Kopp explains. "If the dog never relieves the pressure, the cow won't know where to go and will likely run or fight."

## The right stuff

It sounds complicated, but a well-bred herding or gathering-type stock dog already has the right instincts. Border collies and Hangin' Tree cowdogs are popular herding/gathering breeds.

"The dog's instinct is to bring livestock to the handler so you can make the kill so he gets to eat," Kopp explains. "But it only works when the handler is at the top of the

pecking order."

Heeler-type stock dogs instinctively chase livestock instead of bringing them toward the handler, Kopp adds. They can be trained as gatherers, but it goes against their instincts.

## Daily contact is key

For dogs to be effective when you really need their help, you'll need to work with them regularly. For instance, Scott Pfeiffer makes a point of using his dogs as he does daily chores, even when he doesn't really need their help. "If it takes an extra 10 minutes to accomplish the original task, so be it," he says.

That effort pays off when he needs to separate cow-calf pairs, move a bull or round up cattle that have gotten out. "If the cows get out, it's no big deal anymore," says Pfeiffer.

Regularly using dogs for day-to-day chores also lets the cattle become accustomed to the dogs, so they stay calmer when you're working them, Pfeiffer adds. "So many people don't want to fool with it, but they don't know what they're missing."

*Keck writes from Raymond, Ohio.*

## Stock dog clinics cross the country

**E**LVIN Kopp conducts stock dog clinics across the country. He could be in your area. He will be conducting a session on stock dogs at the 2008 Cattle Industry Annual Convention in Reno, Nev., next February.



**TRAVELER:** Canadian rancher and dog trainer Elvin Kopp advised participants at a recent stock dog clinic at John Lavelle's Ohio Angus operation.

## Study stock dogs on the Web

**F**OR more information on handling cattle with stock dogs, check out these Web sites:

- [www.buckeyecowdog.com](http://www.buckeyecowdog.com)
- [www.lavellefarms.com](http://www.lavellefarms.com)
- [www.sjcatleco.com](http://www.sjcatleco.com)
- [stockmanship.com/stockdogs.htm](http://stockmanship.com/stockdogs.htm)