



Starting your horse on cattle work

Cattle work can be an exciting and pleasurable activity for both horse and rider, whether you are a serious competitor, a farmer or just learning. In this article we will outline how we like to introduce our horses to cattle.

When we first start introducing our horse to cattle, we work on understanding the horse's attitude toward cattle and observe if the horse is curious, scared, uninterested or simply somewhere in between. Once this is understood we work on building the horse's confidence and creating an interest in understanding his task at hand.

Before we start our introduction we ensure we have our horses in the appropriate frame of mind. Depending on the horse's temperament, sometimes working cattle can them excited, so we ensure they are properly primed and warmed up with necessary trotting, cantering and flexions to have them physically and mentally prepared.

A horse is a natural follower, so the easiest way to start is by following a cow. To do this you would need an arena of some sort containing one cow and you on your horse. You don't have to have a specifically bred cow horse to teach this idea to your horse; most horses will show interest in following a single cow.

Teaching a horse to track or follow a cow is beneficial in several ways. If your goal is to compete in cow sports or to train your horse for farm work, this is the first step in getting your horse to travel at all speeds in all gaits. In addition, teaching your horse to speed up and slow down whilst following a cow will get him comfortable with speed without falling apart emotionally.

The idea is to simply follow/track the cows anywhere in the arena, mirroring the cows speed. If it walks you walk, if it trots you trot, if it changes direction you change direction.

You will direct your horse as much as necessary but try to do as little as possible.

Turn your horse loose to the cow, give him the opportunity to learn on his own and only help him when necessary. Don't hang onto his mouth, give him his head with a nice loose rein, as this will give him the opportunity to hook onto a cow and become interested in the cow.



Don't be too concerned about driving the cow in this early stage, just quietly direct your horse along the same track the cow is taking. In doing this you will be utilising your horse's natural curiosity and building his confidence.

Getting your horse to step into a herd of cattle can be a somewhat frightening, even intimidating experience. Doing the follow the leader exercise with the cow leaving or moving away from the horse will give him a huge boost in confidence.

The rules of follow the leader are simple:

Do not over run the cow or get too close, about one cow's body length behind is the closest you will get.

You need to be close enough to engage your horse's curiosity, so try to remain within two cow lengths of your beast.

Pretty soon your horse will realise what his job at hand is; to follow the cow at whatever speed the cow is travelling at in a relaxed and happy frame of mind.

You need to feel your whole horse in this exercise; know when he may become overzealous, or looking to bite or strike at the cow. Before this happens you need to stop it from happening. Sit deep in your seat and then take hold of the reins, search for a soft feel, get to his feet and get him to listen. You may even have to get him stopped and back up a step or two, then get right back to your task at hand – following/tracking the cow!

Be sure to consider your cow as well, don't overdo it and be sure to quit before you overcook it.

If you don't have access to cattle, you can have friend on horse do exactly the same thing, impersonate a cow. Except for getting your horse used to a cow, many of the benefits are the same if you stick to the rules!