Introduction

Have you ever wondered why your horse or cattle do certain things? This article will answer some of the commonly asked questions about behavior problems in grazing animals. Some of the topics that will be covered are: Why does a horse that is well behaved most of the time suddenly rear or buck and why is a hand reared pet bull sometimes dangerous? Other areas that will be covered are loading onto a trailer and teaching animals to lead. An understanding of behavioral principles will make it easier, safer and more enjoyable when you work with animals.

Question: Why is my horse or bull calm and well behaved at home, but he becomes agitated and hard to handle at a show or auction?

Answer: This problem is most likely to occur in animals with flighty, excitable genetics. Animals with an excitable temperament are more likely to panic when they are suddenly confronted with the novel environment of a show or auction. Animals that have inherited a calmer temperament are less likely to panic in a new environment. To help prevent this problem, get your horse or bull accustomed to the sights and sounds of a show or auction. He needs to be gradually exposed to flags, bicycles, public address systems and learn to remain calm when his familiar caretaker is absent. A safe way to begin acclimating an animal to flags is to put them up in the pasture and allow the naturally curious animal to approach and explore them. The animal needs to become acclimated to new things BEFORE he leaves home. One way to help prevent an animal from becoming agitated when a familiar caretaker is absent is to have many different people quietly handle the young animal. It needs to learn that people in general are good.

Question: Why are some cattle so "wild" when they enter a feedlot and how can I produce calmer cattle which will settle down more quickly when they enter a feedlot?

Answer: Cattle that originate from ranches where they seldom see people will be harder to handle at the feedlot than cattle that see people every day. Ranchers should walk quietly among their cattle to get them accustomed to closer contact with people. Another problem is that cattle
that have been exclusively handled by people on horseback may become agitated when handled by people on foot. This is particularly a problem at the packing plant because all handling is done on foot. Some of the animals that see a man on foot for the first time at a packing plant can be dangerous and difficult to handle. To prevent this problem, cattle should be quietly introduced to people on foot, people on horseback and to many types of vehicles before they leave the ranch of origin. It is important that the calves' first experience with a person on foot or on horseback is positive. First experiences with new things make a big impression on animals. It is very important to make sure the first experience is either positive or neutral. On ranches where handling is done on horseback, the animals should also be acclimated to people walking through them. On ranches where all handling is done on foot, the animals should be acclimated to horses and riders walking through them so they will be familiar with them before they arrive at a feedlot. Invite some friends over to ride through your pastures. If the calf's first experiences with a horse and rider is being roped, this could cause problems when the calf goes to a feedlot. This could make him scared of horses.

**Question:** Most of my cattle will move easily through the squeeze chute but a few of my cows refuse to enter.

**Answer:** The most likely explanation is that the cows that refuse to move have had a bad experience such as being accidentally hit hard on the head with the headgate. Cattle have excellent memories and animals that have had their neck or head hurt by the headgate do not forget.

**Question:** What is the best way to teach a colt or steer to lead?

**Answer:** You need to use behavioral principles to induce the animal to lead instead of force. For steers, let them wear a halter with a dragging lead rope for several days so that they learn to not pull back when they step on the rope. Do not tie the animal to a post and let it pull back and fight. Doing this can ruin some of the animals that have a nervous, excitable disposition. They can get so frightened that they never get over the trauma. An animal with a more placid, calm temperament will habituate after he pulls back on the halter a few times but the animal with a nervous, excitable temperament may become so scared that he may start kicking at people due to fear. The animal may never get over its fear and may become a dangerous animal that is likely to kick people. Plan on taking plenty of time to train your animal. This is especially important with nervous, flighty cattle and hot-blooded breeds of horses. Teach your animal to stand still and to lower its head when you take the halter on or off. When taking the halter off, wait until the animal's head is down and he is calm. This teaches the animal that the halter only comes off when the behavior is calm. Once the animal has become accustomed to the halter, it has to learn to be led. The mistake that many people make is to keep pulling on the halter when the animal moves forward. When the animal takes one small step forward or even leans forward, you should instantly stop pulling on the lead rope. This rewards the animal by relieving pressure. The timing has to be right otherwise the animal will not make the association. It has to learn that you will stop pulling when it moves forward. Always end a training session on a good
note with the animal doing something right. If your horse or steer become fearful and excited, it will take 30 minutes for him to calm back down. Keep training sessions short and end them before your animal gets agitated.

**Question:** Why does the hand raised pet bull calf or male llama attack its owner when it becomes fully mature?

**Answer:** The problem is due to mistaken identity. Grazing animals identify with the animals or people they grow up with. To produce a safer bull, young bull calves should be either raised on a cow or placed in a social group with other calves before they are 6 to 7 weeks old. They need to grow up with their own kind. The bull calf that is raised away from other cattle is more likely to attack people because he views them as rivals and wants to become dominant. Therefore he attacks people instead of trying to become dominant over another bull. Another way to prevent future aggression in an orphan hand raised bull calf is to make a steer out of it. If the male animal has valuable genetics, move him somewhere where he can be raised in a social group with others of his own kind. Rearing animals in a social group will also help prevent excessive fighting in bulls, steers, heifers, mares, geldings or stallions. Animals reared by themselves do not know when to stop fighting another animal.

**Question:** How do I teach a young colt to load onto a trailer?

**Answer:** It is very important that the colt's first experience with the trailer is good. If he hits his head or falls down the first time loading is attempted, he will never forget it. A permanent fear memory may be formed which could cause the horse to fear trailers. Fear memory formation is especially a problem in hot-blooded horses with a nervous temperament. When introducing a trailer, try feeding the horse in it. Often it is easier to get a horse into a large stock trailer. To reach the feed, the horse has to go all the way into the trailer. I recommend a large stock trailer when first introducing an animal to a trailer. After he learns to go in the stock trailer, he can then be trained to go into smaller trailers. Opening up a window in the front of the trailer so that the horse can see light through the front of the trailer may also make loading easier. Animals often resist going into dark places. It is also essential that the trailer has non-slip flooring. Animals panic when they start to slip. Removing the partitions in slant load or a two horse trailer often makes it easier to teach a horse to enter the trailer. When you arrive at your destination wait until the horse is calm before you let him out of the trailer.

**Question:** Why does my usually well-behaved horse suddenly buck or rear for apparently no reason?

**Answer:** This may be caused by an old fear memory being triggered. Often the problem occurs when the horse transitions from one gait to another. When the horse was first trained, too many new things may have been forced onto the horse too quickly. This may have caused him to get very frightened. This is especially a problem in more hot-blooded horses. Memories in animals
are sensory based and they would be stored in the brain like pictures, audiotapes or specific tactile touch feelings. When a horse changes gait, a saddle feels different. The weird feeling of cantering with the saddle for the first time may have frightened the horse. A horse with a calm disposition can be more quickly introduced to new things than an animal with a flighty, excitable disposition. Fear memories are very specific. I observed a horse that was afraid of black cowboy hats and white hats had no effect. The horse's fear was due to being abused by a man wearing a black cowboy hat. If the object the horse fears can be removed, bucking and rearing may stop. It may also be possible to calm the horse down by talking to him. I have observed that a horse or cow will often calm down when it hears the voice of a person it trusts. The bucking problem that occurs when the horse changes gaits can sometimes be prevented by substituting a completely different saddle or pad that will feel different. Tack that feels different may not trigger the old fear memory. If a horse has been abused with a bit, try a hackamore. A bit with a completely different design may also work. The worst thing a person can do is to punish fear-based behavior. Punishing fear just makes it worse.

**Question:** How can I tell when horses or cattle are starting to become fearful and agitated?

**Answer:** Both horses and cattle will start switching their tails when they begin to become fearful. As the animal becomes increasingly agitated, the tail will lash back and force faster and faster. When a horse is being trained, the lesson should be ended before the animal shows signs of agitation or fear. Always end the lesson on a good note. Get the animal to do something right before you quit. With young animals keep training sessions short. Fifteen minutes every day is better than 2 hours once a week. Pushing a young horse too hard when it shows signs of fear may result in rearing or bucking. Another sign the horse is becoming fearful is he will raise his head higher and higher. Agitated fearful cattle in a milling herd will raise their heads up. Fearfulness or agitation is a matter of degree. A good visual analogy is a pot of water heating up to a boil. When an animal kicks or bucks the pot has boiled over. When a horse does a one or two tail swishes, the pot may be just starting to simmer. A training session should probably be continued when there is one or two tail swishes, but the trainer must learn to read the animal so that it is never pushed to the point that it bucks, kicks or bites.

People who work with animals must not misinterpret motivation. A horse that bucks during training or a cow that struggles in a squeeze chute is motivated by fear. When a bull attacks, the behavior is motivated by true aggression. Punishing a fearful animal will make it worse, where punishing an aggressive or disobedient animal may be appropriate in some situations. Just remember, animals with more flighty, excitable genetics will have more fear-based behavior.

**Question:** How can I teach a horse or cow to respect my space and to not run over me?

**Answer:** Problems with pushy animals are most likely to occur with low fear animals with calm
genetics. It is best to teach animals when they are young on appropriate interactions with people. Never, never play butting games with a bull calf and never encourage a colt to push up against you. The animals need to learn to respect your space and that you will pet or feed on your terms. Only offer feed when the animal respects your space. Scratch bulls under the chin, on the withers and on the rear end. Scratching cattle on the forehead encourages butting. Horses should be rubbed on the withers and forehead. The effect of rubbing on the forehead is different in horses and cattle. Try positive reinforcement first. Stroke the animal when he is not pushy and instantly withdraw stroking if he starts getting pushy. You should also teach the animal to get back when you ask him too. Stroking is more effective than patting. Stroking is more like the natural licking of a mother animal. Horses have a nibbling, grooming behavior that is too rough for tender human skin. Your horse has to learn that he cannot do his natural horse behavior on you. If he tries to nibble, try instantly withdrawing stroking. Your timing must be quick so that he will make the association. Try withdrawal of positive reinforcement first before resorting to punishment.

Question: Should I imprint train my foals?

Answer: Some foal imprint training methods are too rough and may traumatize foals with a nervous, excitable temperament. I prefer a more gentle approach. If the mare is tame, one can usually start petting a foal within 2 or 3 days. Do not try to sneak up on it. When you are petting the mare, just casually reach over and pet the foal. Soon you should be able to touch the foal all over. This can be done even if the horses are out in a pasture. Avoid little tickle touches; they scare the animal. Stroke the foal with a firm stroke in the areas where the mare licks it. After the foal starts to like this, gradually move to other parts of its body until you can touch it all over. When it accepts body touching all over, stroke the legs and gently pick up the feet.

Question: How do I get my horse to stop pawing when I feed him or get him to stop hitting the stall door with his front foot before I let him out?

Answer: This behavior occurs because the owner does not realize that they may be rewarding bad behavior. To stop pawing, wait until the horse stops then give him the feed or open the door. Gradually increase the time that he must stay still to get the feed. At first feed or open the door when the horse stops pawing for a few moments. Your timing must be right. Open the door before he starts pawing again. Gradually increase the time he must stand still before you open the door.