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Breaking the bad habits of breaking your calf

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Breaking your calf is the first connection you make with your new project after getting them home, so this ultimately ends up being a very important moment in the development of your relationship. There are many thoughts — as well as misconceptions — associated with starting this process, which we will explore further in this article.

Some common calf breaking techniques include:

- Tying up calves and letting them fight it out
- Putting them in a chute and getting them used to you
- Leading them behind a motorized vehicle, such as a tractor or ATV
- Utilizing a donkey
- Putting a halter and lead on them and letting them drag it around for a few days

As you can see, there are many ways to start this process. Here are a few of my thoughts on the subject:

- I am personally against using any type of motorized vehicle because it is too forceful and could potentially injure the animal.
- Utilizing a donkey is a good way to break a calf, as it teaches them to respect the halter — but this is not always a viable option, as a trained donkey is not available to everyone.
- Putting the calf in a chute and allowing it to get used to you is not a bad thing in the breaking process, but in reality, doing so teaches the calf that you are its friend, meaning that a certain level of respect might never be developed.
- There are many, many other ways of teaching the calf to respect a halter, but the one that is the most widely used — and the one that I feel has the most negative effect — is putting a halter and lead on a calf and letting them drag it around. When this method is utilized, the calf drags the lead and steps on it, which pulls the calf's head down — and when they pull hard enough on it, the lead will release from underneath their feet. As a result, the calf learns that when the rope gets tight, they should put their head down and pull harder, as doing so will release them from that restriction. This is the complete opposite of what we want to teach. We've all seen kids' steers get loose in the showring, and it always starts with the calf putting their head down, pulling hard and taking off, just like this exercise teaches them to do in the early stages of breaking. In my opinion, you're asking for trouble from the start by utilizing this technique.

Now that you know where I stand on these practices, here are a few simple, safe, positive and easy techniques to put into use.

After you get your calf home, you should give them a few days to acclimate to their new surroundings. You may then bring them into a confined area where you can put a halter on them, such as in an alleyway or behind a gate. Slowly introduce them to the halter. Once you have put the halter on, put the calf into a smaller pen, where you can use a show stick to retrieve the lead of the halter off of the ground and tie the animal up at a length of 4 feet or more.

Continued on next page ----->

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The halter itself is very important. Make sure you're using a ring halter, which will slide on the calves' chins and not tighten up uncomfortably, as a regular halter is prone to do. The ring halter is a rewarding halter; when the calves give in to the pull of being tied up, it will release very easily, providing some relief for their faces and, therefore, teaching them to respect the halter.

Our family actually uses specially made ring halters that are 4 feet longer than the normal halter, allowing us to tie up at more than 4 feet. Some of you might think that these halters would get tangled up when tying them that long, but in reality, they are less restrictive, and in no time at all, the calves are lying down because they have not been forced into the breaking process. Tying them at just 16 inches restricts them, which can lead to a bit of a fight at first. Also, tying the calves up at 16 inches and letting them fight it out increases the likelihood that they will get tangled up and potentially injured.

Alternatively, by using a non-restrictive tying-up process, they will ultimately give in much more easily because, much like children, it is hard to force these animals to do something that they don't want to do or are unfamiliar with. When they think it is their idea, however, the process has a much more positive ending, because we have ultimately tied them up without using much force. Do this all day long for the first day, and don't be afraid to go in there once in a while just to pick up their pen and be around them but try to generally leave them alone. Then, on the second day, you can tie them a little tighter, and on the third day, tie them a little tighter yet, and so on and so forth. By following this process, you will have a calf that has learned to respect the halter by the third day. Also, always remember that, when we refer to tying them up, we mean tying them low or level; do not tie them with their heads up yet, as this will be part of the process later.

After completing all of this, we need to teach the calves to lead. Most exhibitors might take hold of the halter and just try to hang on during the leading process, but again, this doesn't teach the animal what it needs to learn. The easiest and fastest way to trick them into leading correctly is by taking very short trips in the barn, such as from their pen on a short run to the wash rack. This may only be a few feet, and that is perfectly fine. Then, return from the wash rack back to their pen, where you can work on their hair. The most important part of this process, much like when you started tying them up, is to allow plenty of lead between you and their head when going from point A to point B. After establishing a daily routine and repeating these short runs, you have ultimately taught the calf to follow you from one place to the other within the barn — which is essentially what you want them to do when you go outside.

To recap, here are a few key points to help you in the breaking stage of your project:

- Be patient; give them a few days to get used to their new surroundings.
- Put the halters on them for the first time when they are in a confined space, such as in an alley or behind a gate.
- Use a ring halter.
- Give them plenty of lead when tying them up for the first time.
- Remember to stay patient; take a few days to slowly shorten that lead up and start tying them tighter.
- Create a daily routine of short runs from point A to point B.

Remember: the earlier you start this process, the better off you and your project will be. The showing is not where you want to be schooling your calf to lead; it's where you should pick up your award for following a successful breaking process and exhibiting great showmanship.

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