

Tillers’

TechGuide

Advanced Training Techniques for Oxen

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Acknowledgements

The author was inspired to write this *TechGuide* while teaching an “Oxen Basics” workshop at Tillers. Drew spent evenings reviewing literature that Tillers has gathered from around the world on ox training. He was impressed that, despite minimal interaction and brief documentation, the training approaches from around the world were very similar. He decided to expand on training techniques beyond what he had included in the **Oxen Handbook** and beyond our prior *TechGuide* on Training **Young Steers**.

We look forward to comments. Future revisions will integrate suggestions, corrections, and improvements to illustrations. Please send comments to: Tillers International , 5239 South 24th Street, Kalamazoo, MI 49002 USA.

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A team of well-trained oxen is a joy to watch and to work. Even the most skilled cattlemen are impressed with the responsiveness and obedience that oxen demonstrate under what I would consider ideal circumstances. I had no knowledge of training cattle, no written materials to fall back on, and only a basic understanding of cattle behavior. As a boy, I did have lots of time, patience, and some guidance from experienced ox teamsters.

Many years and many teams later, I can honestly say those first oxen were also my best-trained team. My success with that team was due primarily to the cattle being very friendly, hand fed since birth, and very young when I began training. I was their provider and their leader. I know enough about cattle to make sure that they never successfully tested my dominance. That first pair never knew running away was even possible. They trusted my judgement, even when I made mistakes, yet they never seemed to hold a grudge.

Not all teamsters will have such a successful first team, but it is my goal to encourage and inspire them to train teams to be a joy to work. Many potential teamsters have work that can be done

“Working oxen can be very productive and rewarding if it is done properly, but if the animals are abused physically or verbally, or on the other extreme, not controlled with a strong enough hand, then the animals will rebel in one way or another, and not perform up to your expectations.”

Paramanda dasa, **Ox Training**

with a team. Real work is the best training aid teamsters can have. A team will learn best through repetition and consistent handling. Working a team in the field or forest, after they have learned some basic commands, will usually benefit both teamster and animals.

It is important that the animals not be discouraged early in training. A slightly tired animal pays attention. An exhausted and sore animal will resist the entire training process. Learn to read your cattle and understand what you can expect of them.

As you read this **TechGuide**, understand that the teamster and working animals have to develop a relationship based on respect and dominance. This type of relationship is easy to establish in younger animals which are handled often. In older cattle this may be the most difficult challenge cattle because they believe they should train the animals only with kindness and adoration.

Cattle are very simple in their normal behavior. They desire feed, rest, water, shelter, and some social interaction. Since oxen are usually castrated males, the desire toward sexual behavior is diminished. While cattle can learn to enjoy kindness and frequent attention from humans, it is not their normal behavior to enjoy attention from animals not of their own specie. Brk at all. They are unlike some of our other domestic animals which may look forward to daily workouts and training.

For oxen to perform work under human direction for hours on end is a radical change from the normal behavioral patterns of adult bovines. A teamster has to make the animals work. While

“A person setting out to train a team of oxen should realize that the animals to be trained are several times heavier and more powerful than the trainer. They must not be allowed to learn that fact until training has proceeded to a point that the animals have become docile and responsive to the trainer.”

Murray Brown, **Oxen Traction**

this may sound cruel, trained animals rarely resist working in the yoke. Calves are easily acclimated to this behavior modification, but adult cattle will resist. eamsters have dealt with challenges and problems.

Chapter 2 Behavior of Cattle

Before anyone attempts to work with cattle, it is important that they have a basic understanding of the behavior of cattle. When moving up to training mature or wild cattle or to curbing undesired behaviors, a more comprehensive understanding of the responses of cattle is imperative. This chapter should help teamsters and trainers to emphasize and anticipate behavior.

Gregariousness

Cattle are social creatures, as are most farm animals. They seek out the companionship of animals of their own species. An animal which has belonged to a group or herd all its life will become seriously distressed when removed from that group. Yet, being social animals, cattle will learn to bond to new groups, but only after establishing their place in the new herd. For cattle, testing themselves in a new herd to find their rank in the order of subordinate to dominant members is the natural way to interact. Understanding this is most useful in learning to train cattle.

In addition to their social behaviors, cattle have numerous sexual behaviors (which for the most

part are eliminated by castration), specific feeding and resting behaviors, and relatively few individually deviant or abnormal behaviors.

The training and subsequent working of cattle takes time away from their normal routines of feeding, drinking, ruminating, resting, and social interaction. This time away from normal behaviors can create stress to animals. Add to this stress a recent weaning, separation from the herd, harsh treatment during handling, and too many demands early in training, and not only is training made more difficult, but susceptibility to disease and ill health are increased.

It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that the animals be handled carefully, not be pushed too quickly, and be allowed frequent rests and breaks during training. The early training for older animals is a very critical time of acclimation and learning. Animals which are poorly handled at this stage may become sick or more difficult to train.

In working with oxen, it is often easiest to work with two animals that are already familiar with each other. The animals will be easier to control in the yoke, and the presence of a known teammate will have a calming effect. Using a well broke animal to calm and train a smaller animal works well, especially if there is no chance of the untrained animal challenging the well broke ox.

An older team which has spent a considerable amount of time in the yoke will rarely separate by choice. Where you find one, the other is likely nearby. This social behavior has definite advantages when trying to find oxen that have been released to graze. Some teamsters have said it is often better to beef a well broke ox, when something happens to its teammate than re-teaming it (Quinn). However, when much time, experience, and expense has been invested in a well-trained ox, it will most likely be easier and faster to get the surviving ox to adapt to a new mate than to start a green team.

Dominance and Training

One animal in any team will be dominant. This animal will get the best feed, be the first one to drink at a watering space with limited headroom, and will dominate the other animal as it moves about its living space. Cattle establish their dominance by force. Dominance is generally determined by body weight and horn size, but aggressiveness and relationships to dominant animals may have a bearing on an animal's status as well (Honore).

Even though the relationship is established through force and physical aggression, its maintenance requires far less energy. Most subordinate animals retreat at the slightest sign of aggression from the dominant animal. Occasionally animals will spar –as if playing. In sparring, a subordinate animal may be able to take advantage of newfound size, strength, or horns to gain status in the herd or group (Honore).

In the natural herd environment, the dominant animal is not always the leader. Leadership can vary among activities. Usually the largest bulls follow the cows until the destination has been reached. Then, they push their way to the front to get choice feed or water. A leader may be the most experienced animal or an older animal of less status, and the herd recognizes that expertise and follows eagerly.

Understanding the social behavior and dominance within herds is very helpful in working and training cattle. To effectively train cattle you must prove to the animals (usually physically) that you are dominant and in control. This should be a complete dominance much like the dominance of a large bull over a herd of smaller cows. With small calves which are easily intimidated this is usually readily accomplished. With mature cattle which have had little or no handling, exerting dominance is the biggest challenge to training.

The teamsters must quickly and effectively establish dominance, or training will be much more difficult. If an animal proves itself that it is more dominant or powerful than the trainer at any time, it will make the animal much harder or even impossible to control (Barden, Scruton, Watson, Brown).

Just like the dominant animal in the herd, you must let your subordinate animals know without a doubt that there is no advantage in challenging you. Establishing this relationship takes skill, thought, and mechanical advantage. Even a small calf can overpower most people who are not prepared to catch and restrain that animal. If properly captured and restrained, however, the animal will learn to respect the trainer, and maintenance of the relationship will be much easier.

Beyond proving him/herself to be in control, a teamster must also prove that he/she is worthy of being followed.

The teamster must gain respect as a leader – one that the cattle can trust. Cattle require adequate feed, water, rest, shelter, and freedom from danger or injury. Cattle will be easier to work when they realize that you will provide them with their basic needs. An animal that has been dependent on its own skill and instinct, or that of the herd, may take considerable effort and time to accept the teamster as leader. But be patient, cattle will learn to trust you when they are treated fairly.

It should be noted that there are genetic and environmental differences which can have a tremendous impact on how long the initial dominance training will take (Wilson). An animal that has at some time in its life proven to itself its strength, skill, or speed, or ability to outmaneuver predators or people is going to be harder to control. Don't underestimate cattle's strength or experience, especially mature

animals. Bovines that have come to rely on their own skills or instincts are going to challenge even the most competent teamster.

Most teamsters and cattlemen agree that there are many differences in working with different breeds of cattle under the same management and handling, no matter the age when you begin training. Some breeds are always fast moving and eager to outmaneuver their teamster, while others are content to work placidly in the yoke. Two extreme examples among breeds commonly used as oxen in the United States are the Brown Swiss and the Milking Devon. Both breeds have a history of being used for draft, milk, and meat. Yet under the very same management, their behavior is markedly different in the yoke.

Brown Swiss are quiet, docile, rather slow in movements, and easily handled as a rule. In fact, quietness is carried to the extreme in sluggishness in some individuals, and a notable tendency toward stubbornness (Vaughan, Eikles, Schmidt, Conroy). However, for some tasks, this slow deliberate movement may prove safer and more enjoyable. A teamster must realize the strong points and weaknesses of a breed before selecting a team.

The Milking Devon, on the other hand, under the same training and management is a fast moving, active animal, well noted for its intelligence and quickness of action. According to some they are second to none in the yoke (Housman, Fisher). A 19th century English cattleman stated,

“Where the ground is not too heavy, the Devonshire Oxen are unrivaled at the plow. They have a quickness of action that no other breed can equal and few horses can exceed. They are sometimes trotted along with empty wagons at 6 miles per hour, a degree of speed no other ox has been able to stand (Adams).”

There is, of course, no perfect breed of cattle for oxen. A breed which is easily trained or gets

extremely large may not be appropriate for a particular hot climate or a region with disease problems.

Flight Distance

One of the biggest hurdles in working with cattle is overcoming their defensive flight distance. A well-trained team can be approached at any time, anywhere, whether they are in the yoke or not. This approachability allows a teamster to touch and catch the animals as desired.

Most animals have a natural fear of the unknown. When untrained cattle are approached, their awareness is apparent. Then, with added movement, cattle direct their heads toward the approaching person. They soon orient their eyes, nose, ears, and then entire bodies toward the intruder. Approaching even closer often brings about a state of alarm or fear. Then, just a few more feet precipitates the animals' turning and running.

In tame cattle this flight distance - the distance at which the animal allows approach before it turns to move away - is generally much smaller. For working oxen it is best to have animals which come when called and do not run or show alarm at all when approached.

The flight distance of an animal tells a teamster a lot about how it needs to be handled. Some cattle are so wild that they run away as soon as they detect the presence of a human. Such cattle are the most difficult to train. They have developed a real fear of people. To overcome such fear takes a long time in training, and they may never work willingly. On the other hand, animals which allow people to come within a few hundred yards without flight are trained a little more easily. But the easiest adult animals to train and work are those which are used to being herded, touched, or led.

Yet, the even more desirable training situation is working with young calves which have been handled since birth – especially those hand or bottle fed. After being introduced to the basic commands and being led around individually or in pairs, the flight distance of these calves is minimized. The commands taught at this young age in consistent, fair training will be remembered without fear and the urge to flight later in their lives will be diminished.

Aggressive Behavior

Cattle by nature are not afraid to use force when they feel they are in danger and cannot retreat or when protecting their young. Frequently halter-broken beef cows surprise their owners at calving with their aggressiveness. Never underestimate the aggressiveness of cattle which are not handled. While cattle usually retreat from people, they do stand their ground instead of running more often than sheep, goats, horses, and other small farm stock.

Nonetheless, most oxen are very calm, easy going, and forgiving beasts. Even under the worst circumstances and cruelty, oxen rarely attack their teamster. Instead, they usually retreat or withstand the circumstances if they feel escape is not an option.

According to R.E. Pike, from *Tall Trees, Tough Men, In the Pacific Northwest, USA*

“When an ox couldn't pull the load, and the driver wouldn't give up, the bellowing of the bulls (oxen) would even make a strong man cringe.”

In spite of this tolerance, sometimes an ox may be aggressive toward people other than their teamster, especially children, if they think they can dominate or intimidate them.

Cattle should learn to respect all people and view them all as dominant. But given the chance, cattle may establish dominance over some

people without the teamster realizing it. When cattle can successfully bluff people into retreat, or are motivated to chase them out of their living space, they have learned they can dominate people. Be careful not to permit your team to be tormented or teased by anyone, as this will encourage chasing. Even the well-trained team can easily injure an unsuspecting person, if they are allowed to think they may dominate people. They must realize that others are friends of the teamster and under his/her protection. At the same time, the animals should be able to trust their teamster to keep others from teasing or annoying them.

Sensory Awareness

Cattle are very aware of their environment and notice any changes in it. Over time cattle can become habituated to many noises, smells, and sights that other draft animals would shy from. Yet, they will almost always recognize something new or different in their normal surroundings or routine.

Cattle are creatures of habit, and are very content to do the same thing day after day, provided it is not uncomfortable. Yet, given the chance to do something new, they will quickly leave their normal routine – for example: going out to pasture in spring, leaving the barn after months of being indoors, or enjoying an application of fresh bedding. Experienced animals, with an opening of opportunity, normally lead the way to new activities with lots of excitement, and younger animals readily follow. Even young animals have the curiosity to investigate any new event or object by sight, sound, then smell, and eventually, if possible, by taste.

Cattle are almost always aware of their environment – even when they seem to be peacefully grazing, resting, or just ruminating.

Sight – With their eyes located on the sides of their heads, cattle are able to see full circle

around themselves – giving them a panoramic view. This peripheral vision combined with the inability to see colors well makes it easy for them to distinguish movement. In the wild, this helps them see approaching danger, whether eating or resting. In the yoke, it facilitates their watching the teamster and most of his/her actions. But since oxen are usually worked in pairs with a yoke, both the yoke and the opposite ox block some of their normal vision. Yet, they learn to turn their heads to see what they want.

Visual cues are very important in training oxen. They usually respond as much to visual cues as they do to voice commands. Cattle attentively watch the teamster at all levels of training. Indeed, I often tell aspiring young teamsters that oxen are far more observant of us, than we are of them.

Cattle will observe the way you walk and move and then respond according to patterns. If you approach them quickly with lots of force and aggressiveness, they usually retreat. They are visually reading your mood. When you raise the whip faster than normally, a well-trained team will anticipate a coming hit and stop acting up. The teamster who does not consistently match his/her movements and actions with voice commands will have a much harder time controlling a team.

Cattle can be driven with only visual and occasional physical cues. I have observed mute teamsters readily handle very large teams in pulling contests. And even those teamsters who believe their teams drive strictly with voice commands would be surprised to learn how much their animals are responding to subtle visual cues that they fail to notice.

Hearing – Cattle have very good hearing, and there is no need to always yell or talk loud to a team. If they are distracted or are pulling noisy implements, louder commands may be needed to

get their attention. But don't be fooled. Many an ox has made its teamster think it isn't hearing.

As a Vermont Farmer wrote in 1849 to the *New England Farmer*,

“I think many teamsters talk too loud to their oxen. They (oxen) hear as quickly as a man when called for their food, which proves that their hearing is good. Why then should a teamster scream so hard as to be heard a half mile or more?” (Reynolds)

Cattle cannot understand words except as cues when repeated over and over in association with desired behavior. They can learn to distinguish among a number of verbal sounds – including their names. In New England, many teamsters have cattle that respond to over 10 different verbal commands. These usually include, but are not limited to:

- Get up – Move forward
- Easy – slow down
- Whoa – stop
- Gee – turn right
- Haw – turn left
- Step in – step toward pole/chain
- Step out – step away from a pole/chain
- Back – move in reverse
- Head up – lift their heads when in yoke
- Come boss – call cattle for feeding
- Their name – get their individual attention

While these commands are usually given along with visual or physical cues, a well-trained team responds to all of the above upon hearing the voice alone.

It is generally best when cattle are trained to words from the native tongue of the teamster, but the words chosen for commands should be distinct, enough in sound to be easily identified and not confused. When similar sounding words are in use, they can be given in different tones

and most cattle will be able to understand the teamsters' wishes.

Since cattle cannot understand spoken conversation, some teamsters feel you should not speak to the team unless giving a command. In this way the team is supposed to be less distracted when you address them with a command.

Les Barden, an accomplished teamster from Rochester, New Hampshire, states,

“The habit of continually talking to cattle serves no valuable purpose. More than likely it only serves to vent the nervousness of the novice teamster.” (Barden)

He argues that before every voice command the team should be given a preparatory command (other than its name – which should be reserved for speaking to an individual animal) in order for the animals to realize they must pay attention. This preparatory command may be a whistle, a click, or some other cue to signal to the cattle that they are about to receive instruction.

Teamsters who continue to give voice commands without getting their teams to do what is desired may actually be teaching the oxen to respond with undesired behavior – disregard or resistance. An example might be an animal which lowers and shakes its head rather than backing when the command “Back Up” is spoken. Is the problem a failure to understand or simple resistance? If the team resisted backing and the teamster was hard on the animals for resisting, they may have associated the cue “Back Up” with getting hit on the head, and then learned to shake their heads in resistance. This can be a terrible habit, and some teams that have been poorly trained may never back up using the desired cue. They have learned to mis-associate it.

To read the will of its teamster, an ox must understand all of the actions of the teamster. When a teamster gives inconsistent or excessive visual, physical, or voice cues; training takes longer and is more difficult. These guidelines will help an animal focus on your commands.

- 1) **Be Firm.** To gain and maintain dominance over the animals, every command should resonate with the sound of authority.
- 2) **Be Patient.** Cattle can only learn a few sounds at a time. It may take days or weeks to get one animal to willingly respond. This usually is not stupidity, but an intelligent resistance to something with which they are unfamiliar.
- 3) **Be Consistent.** Cattle watch and listen even when you are not speaking to them. Inconsistent or excessive banter will confuse them.

Touch – Cattle have a very keen sense of touch, even though their hide is tremendously strong. This is evidenced by their twitching behavior when irritated by a fly lighting on their backs. Certain parts of their bodies are more sensitive than others. The slightest touch of a thread to the hide at the shoulder or over the ribs causes an animal to twitch its skin to rid itself of the pest. At the other extreme, the ruggedness of their horns and heads permit them to push and shove in battle – withstanding tremendous impact and pressure.

These examples of sensitivity illustrate how little it takes to get an animals attention, versus how much bodily force they can exert with little or no harm to themselves. Cattle are rugged animals which can withstand tremendous stress and strain. But their robustness does not mean there are training advantages in subjecting them to pain. While it is important to show your dominance over animals early in training, the

whip or goad should be used primarily as a visual directive cue and only occasionally as a physical reminder.

Some negative reinforcement with the whip may be necessary during training, but the whip should only be used in a controlled and well-directed manner. Cattle are easily confused, upset, and scared. When frightened, they do not understand why they are being hit and can sustain a tremendous whipping without learning anything positive.

Just as the mosquito or fly will bring about an immediate and predictable reaction when it lands on cattle, the whip or goad should always signal an immediate and understandable request. The touch of the whip should be well directed, controlled, and forceful enough to get the desired reaction. Use the whip like an extension of your hand. It should only be used to direct the animal's attention or remind it of wrongdoing. Senseless beating of the cattle confuses them and causes them to regress in their training. Touching with the whip should only be done in conjunction with a preceding visual signal or verbal command. This conditions an animal to react before and without being struck by the whip.

While I have pointed out that the first handling of an animal should offer no escape and total restraint, the restraints should not cause tactile pain or injury. It is important that the first capture be as pleasant as possible. If it is painful and includes minor surgery or injections, the animal will fearfully associate capture and handling with pain. Cattle quickly learn to avoid anything that is mildly aversive (Fraser).

Intelligence

Teamsters have debated for centuries the intelligence of the ox. Are cattle even smart enough to deserve discussion of their intelligence? Is an intelligent ox one which

always behaves even under the cruelest treatment? Or is an intelligent ox one which balks and refuses to work under poor handling and then runs away when it knows it can get away with it?

Cattle are not dumb; in fact, they often train the teamster to react to their cues. In maze tests cattle have performed remarkably well – even better than swine or dogs – when vision alone had to be used to solve the maze (Kilgour). It should be noted that it is often the intelligence of oxen and their rebellious behavior which causes potential teamsters to give up on training (Cannon).

William Youatt, a famous 19th century English cattleman, spoke favorably about the intelligence of oxen,

“Cattle like other animals are creatures of circumstance. We educate them to give us milk, fat, and flesh. There is not much intelligence required for these purposes, but when we press the ox into our immediate services, to draw our cart and plow our land, he rapidly improves upon us. He is in fact an altogether different animal. When he receives a kind of culture at our hands, he seems to be enlightened with a ray of human reason, and warmed with a degree of human affection. Many dairy and beef cattle have just enough wit to find their way to and from the pasture, but the ox rivals the horse in docility and activity, and fairly beats him out in the field of stoutness and honesty of work.”

For the potential teamster to anticipate what cattle will do before they do it, she/he must understand their intelligence. While we possess a degree of intelligence far superior to that of the ox, our poor preparation to counter their smaller intellect often leads to failure. Anticipating the movements of bovines is the best means for exercising some control over their behavior (Fraser). This is true when handling animals for

the first time, or when handling old, experienced oxen.

How Cattle Learn

Learning is a relatively permanent change in response, over time, as a result of practice or patience (Kilgour). Cattle learn in many ways. They also learn far more than we usually give them credit for. Much of their learning occurs in the following manners:

Imprinting – Early in life a calf imprints on its dam, on the herd, and on its immediate environment. A teamster can use this imprinting period to assure that a calf does not associate humans as a threat or a danger, and that the animal becomes familiar with being handled. Some of the best and most easily trained cattle are those which did not imprint on their dams at all, but to humans instead.

Habituation – Habit is a decreased response to stimuli which are experienced over time. For example, when a team is hitched to a load for the first time, it may try to run from the load. As they learn over time that it will not hurt them, they soon become used to the load. This type of learning also takes place when cattle are first captured. If they are unfamiliar with being handled, it is wise to acclimate them to attention before they are exposed to any harsh or possibly painful restraints.

Imitative Learning – Imitation is learning by example. Many young calves learn what to eat by imitating their mothers. Cattle follow the herd, learning the normal routine over time. While cattle cannot train other cattle to work, yoking an untrained animal with a trained ox can be a very successful technique. The advantages of this may be due to imitative learning, as over time the young animal learns what it should do in the yoke by following the trained ox.

Associative Learning or Conditioning – Operant conditioning is one of the most relied upon techniques in training cattle. In this learning technique, the type of reinforcement, or teamster reaction, is dependent on the voluntary response of the animal to the stimulus, or signal. When given a voice, visual, or physical cue, the animal voluntarily responds in some manner. The follow-up reinforcement may be positive or negative depending on how the response meets the expectation of the trainer.

The fastest and most effective learning occurs when the reinforcement follows as close to the desired or undesired response as possible. Delaying reinforcement leads to confusion and frustration of the animal and the trainer.

Pavlovian conditioning involves responses from the animal that are not always voluntary. The animals may not have any idea that they are responding to stimuli. Cattle, which have had a bad experience when being hitched to an implement, may defecate (a sign of nervousness) as they approach that implement. The trainer should realize the team has been conditioned, probably unintentionally, to fear the implement.

NEVER ALLOW CATTLE TO GET THEIR OWN WAY IN THE YOKE!

Cattle learn regardless of how successful the teamster is. Animals learn bad habits – how to get what they want – as easily as they learn what the teamster wants them to do. When they can master how to upset their teamster enough to take off their yoke and return them to pasture, they should not be judged stupid or dumb. In this case, they have also been conditioned through positive reinforcement – when they act up, they are rewarded with what they want.

When cattle are in the yoke they are to do everything the teamster asks them to do. If they just once figure out that they can act up and get away with it, their training has just become more

complicated (Cannon). The most difficult behavioral problems to eliminate are of this self-reinforcing type (Kilgour).

A challenge for the teamster is the bovine's quick learning of routines, such as, where they are yoked and unyoked, where they are fed, and where they are turned to go back home. In training, the work area, yoking area, and pathways must be varied so they learn that they never know when the training or workout will end. A trainer should not allow the animals to get away at any time, even if their workout is over. If the cattle act up and anticipate that it is time to go home, it may be best to hitch them up again and continue working until they are sufficiently tired to not want to run or exert their will. Cattle must learn that when in the yoke they are to always be responsive to the teamster.

The intelligence of oxen and their capacity for learning has fooled many people into believing they are too dumb to work with. They are, nonetheless, intelligent beasts that like to do their own thing, if given the opportunity. When trained properly and not given the chance to outsmart the teamster, their intelligence can be used successfully to accomplish a lot of work with less equipment, and less complicated harnessing and control systems, than is required by most other beasts of burden.

Chapter 3 Developing a Training Plan

As cattle are trained, it is important that they learn to trust people for their basic needs, and not associate people with pain and fear. Training begins the first time cattle come in contact with people. That first experience usually affects the animals in some way, and it is very important that it be as unobtrusive as possible. When cattle are accustomed to being near people, it is still important to take the first steps in training very slowly and deliberately.

It is assumed that prior to training sound, strong, and healthy animals which are similar in size and temperament have been selected. Cattle lacking one or more of these qualities will make the team less valuable and less efficient in the yoke.

It is also important to name the animals. A pair of oxen should have names that are simple, short, and one syllable. Their sounds should not be easily confused with other commands.

Once selected and named, the team is ready to begin training. The initial training will vary according to the degree of socialization the animals have experienced with humans. It is important to establish the teamster's dominant role early in the relationship so the animals will never assert or realize their strength and power. Dominance need not be cruelty. Cattle rarely subject each other to undue pain and suffering, even though one animal is usually dominant over others. Dominance can be established with only enough force to control the animals and their movements. Too much force may result in oxen which lose spirit and become depressed and lethargic in the yoke.

The desired end result of training should be a team with spirit which will eagerly pull and work for the teamster. To achieve this a teamster needs a clear and specific plan to follow to some degree throughout training. Although this need not be a written or elaborate plan, it should outline a flow of events that the teamster controls. Rather than having the teamster reacting to the animals' behavior, the cattle should be reacting to the trainer's techniques.

Individuality and Pairing

As every human being is different, every ox put into the yoke is unique. There are no two animals that are exactly alike in behavior or temperament (Cannon, Conroy, Kramer). For their apparently simplistic behavior and needs, understanding cattle can be very difficult. Steers

with identical parents, breed, and training behave very differently in the yoke. Each individual animal responds differently to commands, to handling, and to the various tasks offered to them.

Some steers simply refuse to work adequately enough to ever achieve a high level of training. In the Northeastern U.S., many teamsters cull a number of cattle before they find two animals which work effectively in pulling contests. Frank Scruton, an accomplished ox-pulling competitor, offers,

“You ought to know in the first month of training whether the animals are good enough to keep. Some animals just don't have what it takes to pull.”

Other steers are so easily trained and eager to work that it is hard to believe. When differences between animals is extreme, it is best to rematch them to animals that behave and act more closely in the yoke. Two fast steers can be worked together, as can two slow steers, but one fast, eager ox and one slow, lazy animal will be difficult, if not impossible, to work together. Culling an inferior animal is sometimes the best solution, before too much time is invested in training.

Placement in the Team

The temperament, size or behavior of an ox often dictates to which side of the yoke they should be assigned. A fast moving, hard to control ox may be placed on the nigh side for better control, or a slower animal may be placed on the nigh side to allow the teamster to keep after him. Some teamsters feel the larger, more powerful ox should be on the off side so the team is always being pushed toward the teamster. Also, this places the larger ox in the furrow when plowing and levels the yoke. And by having the smaller less powerful steer on the nigh side where he can be given more coaxing, the teamster can more

easily see the larger animal to the right. With experience a teamster soon figures out where to place differing animals.

It is easiest to train each steer to one side of the yoke and leave them there. But should problems arise, bad habits develop, or a teammate die, it is not too difficult to retrain an animal to the opposite side.

In training, work the steers together for a few weeks and if a change is warranted, do it early rather than late in the training. It becomes much more difficult to switch sides as the steers become older and more handy. Experienced teamsters occasionally train a team to work on either side of the yoke, that is, both nigh or off ox. This training will take more time and patience, but in the long run may be beneficial. If one steer has to be given a different teammate, its being trained for either side makes it much more versatile. Occasionally, when older teams have developed bad habits, the habits can be broken by switching the animals side to side. Whether or not a teamster works a team on the same side all the time or switches them is a personal preference, but switching is not recommended for a first time teamster.

Preparation for Training

The following points should be helpful for maintaining an effective training schedule.

- 1) Goal Setting – Have a specific plan for training the team. Oxen can only learn a few commands at a time. Know what commands you will teach the team first. Not until those commands are mastered should you move on to the next set of commands. Know and understand the restraint and reinforcement systems you will use; and most importantly, when you will use each of them.
- 2) Techniques – The skills and techniques of the teamster have a direct impact on how

well the team reacts to commands. Study and think about how you will maintain control over the animals. Realize that they will certainly misbehave and that losing your temper usually leads to inconsistent commands. You cannot physically restrain animals that are many times larger than yourself. You must be able to gain and maintain full control of the animals at all times, and this usually requires some mechanical advantage.

When things go wrong, be ready to blame yourself, not the animals. More often than not a teamster who cannot control a team has brought that situation upon him/herself. At every stage of training the teamster should be prepared to control the team using the most effective means necessary. Appreciate that oxen can be well controlled without lines, nose rings, halters and ropes. Yet, to achieve that level of control you must prepare the team for intense training.

3) Be Firm, Be Consistent, and Be Patient – The importance of these rules cannot be overstated. The lack of firmness, consistency, or patience leads to a team which cannot be trusted, cannot be handled, and worst of all, can be dangerous. Even the most unruly, wild team will eventually respond to these three rules of training. A common error in training cattle is expecting too much from the animals all at once. Cattle can learn quickly when they know exactly what is expected and you give them consistent commands to accomplish the task or maneuver. But teaching several commands at once usually confuses them.

Age for Training

Calves and adult animals alike have the capacity to be trained. Yet, when all things are equal, calves usually train more easily than mature cattle. Unfortunately, not all teamsters have the

time, money, or desire to start training their oxen as calves. For these and other reasons, many cattle are trained at more advanced ages. Waiting until animals are closer to maturity before training demands more advanced training – requiring skills and techniques that a teamster dealing with calves does not have to worry about.

Here are some factors to consider in deciding whether to train calves or adults.

Advantages of training mature cattle:

- The return on the time and effort invested in training may be more rapid, provided the training is successful.
- The animals are less likely to become fatigued and to need rest after a short workout.
- The need for numerous yokes of different sizes throughout the growth of young animals is eliminated.
- The animals can be maintained more easily on a diet consisting primarily of roughage.
- The matching of cattle in the team based on temperament, conformation, and size is more easily accomplished.

Disadvantages of training mature cattle:

- The health and safety of the teamster is at greater risk if working with mature, wild cattle.
- The equipment needed must be made to accommodate the uncontrolled force the animal may exert during training.
- The cattle may require a longer period before they can be trusted in the yoke.

- The animals will be more expensive to acquire.
- The skills required to train and handle such cattle, are not easily acquired.

“Whatever you have for a steer, regardless of his age, size, and preconceived notions, the approach must be the same. Place him under control to be sure he will do what you want him to do – when you want him to do it. He is afforded no choices. You are going to command him to do something. Then you are going to cause him to do it.”

Les Barden, **Training the Teamster**,
New Hampshire, USA

Chapter 4 Training

Capture and Restraint

The initial steps in training are evaluating the animals and their behavior and then selecting an appropriate method of capture and restraint. These steps are critical to the success of the entire training program.

Wild and Dangerous Cattle

Prior to handling, cattle which have an extremely large flight distance and show an obvious fear of humans may need a period of acclimation and mild restraint. This period will vary from animal to animal. It may take days or weeks. The objective should be to simply reduce the animals flight distance by convincing them that there is no need to fear humans.

One approach is to place the animals in a corral or a barn where all feed and water are generously provided. Make sure the animals cannot escape. Any escape gives an animal a sense of

dominance and independence. Make this initial contact as pleasant as possible. It is generally advantageous to place each animal in a pen by itself or with its teammate. The restrictions alone are stressful to the animals, so do not continue training until they seem at ease with the new surroundings.

When animals are corralled with a large group of cattle in a large pen, they may not associate the captivity with humans. The objective is to calm down the animals and to familiarize them with people – the trainer when possible. Aggressive cattle should not be beaten or pushed into submission at this point. This would only reinforce any fear of humans. Cattle which were wild and aggressive may turn out to be the best animals in the yoke when properly trained (Kramer, Cannon, Watson). Beware of animals which represent the extremes. Cattle which are extremely aggressive or unusually shy should be avoided as work animals.

“People who use hesitant motions, speak in excited voices, or misuse ropes and whips can cause animals to kick, butt, toss their heads, or refuse to move.”

Peter Watson, **Animal Traction**,
Peace Corps, Benin, West Africa

Restraining Animals

Being prepared with the correct equipment and methods is one of the most important aspects of restraining cattle. Time spent preparing a corral, ropes, and hitching posts to withstand the most unruly animal pays great dividends. Having an animal break loose or realize its superior strength is the worst thing that could happen during an initial capture. Cattle quickly learn how to escape when they fear humans.

The best method of restraint is one which is quick, effective, and safe. In the U.S. this usually means the use of a corral, a chute, and a

locking headgate. The animals are caught in the corral, moved through the chute, and individually captured in the headgate. They may then be further restrained by halters, ropes, or nose rings so they can be tied and allowed to test their restraints. Hopefully if the cattle have been acclimated to people and their new surrounds, the restraints will not be fought for too long.

Nonetheless, **never** leave a green animal tied and unattended. It can choke, suffocate, or become tangled in the ropes. After initial capture, the most effective way to prepare cattle for training is to keep them restrained in close quarters for a while. In the Northeastern U.S. many cattle remain in the barn until they can be handled and touched, and they no longer resist being tied.

First Stages of Training

Many teamsters believe that it is best before yoking animals to start training individually on a halter. This allows the teamster to work with and evaluate each animal individually. It also accustoms each animal to being handled (Scruton, Barden, Watson).

Other teamsters believe that working the animals in a training ring without a halter is effective before yoking for the first time (Parmanada, Keith). The disadvantage of the training ring is that, when the team is yoked outside the ring, they may still require a rope.

A third alternative method of breaking to lead is tying each green animal with a trained animal (Wilson). With large, unruly cattle it is frequently safer to handle one animal at a time than to handle both together.

Initial halter training should include the commands to start or move out and to stop. Make sure your physical position, voice, and visual cues are all consistent and easily understood. If you say, “Get Up,” say it the same way at the same time. Then follow with

the whip going up in the air and a touch on the rump to move the animals forward. The teamster usually stands on the left side of the animal rather than in front. This aids in starting them by giving them an opening into which they can move forward. Depending on their remaining flight distance, standing a few inches further back may help start them going. Also, realize that standing to the left side of the animals may become a cue to move forward or to pay attention.

To teach the command stop or whoa, say the command and follow it by bring the whip down in front of the animal, touching them on the nose or the knees. This combines verbal, visual, and physical cues. Some teamsters also stop walking and the team quickly learns to stop with the teamster. (This may be undesirable if you want to drive the team from behind.) Be aware that too much whip in the face or on the nose early in training may cause animals to toss their heads and become head shy.

When animals are captured, well restrained, and not allowed to escape during halter training they learn that the teamster can dominate them. Although there may be swifter lessons in dominance, animals usually do not lose their spirit when restrained calmly. As most teamsters in the U.S. agree, animals restrained in a less violent manner won't lie down in the yoke very often (Scruton, Barden, Conroy). Some methods of exercising dominance are so severe that teams become lethargic in the yoke. This is not the desired result of dominance training. (It is also the author's belief that harsh methods of restraint such as the Running-W, roping a foot, or severe beating often encourage lying down to resist training.)

Some animals may require more severe restraint. This may suggest moving to the yoke earlier and a system that places an experienced team ahead of the green animals, a light load behind, and a pole between them. This can encourage the

animals instead of frightening and discouraging them. When animals are too wild or unruly to hitch or no other team is available, working them individually with physical restraints such as the Running-W or other rope systems may be warranted. But teamsters should realize that these are extremely severe restraints. The author prefers to hitch the animals early with numerous helpers and allow them to pull a load and tire themselves out. Once tired, they pay better attention.

When using the option of pairing a green animal with a trained ox, the trained animal acts as a restraint and helps calm the new animal. The yoke acts as a more rigid restraint than would a halter or lead rope. The green animal quickly learns to follow the more experienced ox. It is important that the trained animal be large enough to hold the unruly animal should it try to escape. Some teamsters feel this is the safest and most effective way to train mature, unruly animals (Scruton, Kramer).

Don Collins, a veterinarian, and accomplished teamster from Berwick, Maine advised,

“Training a team of calves involves first teaching the animals to function in the yoke, and later teaching them to work on the cart or drag. But starting with an older team it may be easier to hitch them to a load, teaching them to pull at the same time you're teaching them to work in the yoke.”

The weight pulled becomes a system of restraint.

Some teamsters move directly to hitching green teams to a load in a fenced corral or pasture. They fight the steers until they obey the commands to start and stop. (Kramer refers to this as the 'cowboy' style.) Even when using a cowboy style, a trainer should have goals and work towards them. Be sure you are not simply chasing after the steers and confusing them. If the animals are not starting or stopping when

directed to do so after the first few sessions, another method or additional helpers may be needed.

Other teamsters have stated that yoking the animals together and then letting the pair loose to fight the yoke and learn to move together is an option in training oxen (Buchanan, Kramer). Once the animals have fought each other and the yoke and become weary, the teamster steps in and begins training. This method required rugged yokes, and a teamster who will allow the animals to do as they wish in the yoke. The risk of injury and choking is increased using this method of training. The animals also learn that they can move about and do their own things in the yoke – a habit many teamsters do not want to encourage.

Whatever your choice of approach, the early sessions of training are frustrating, discouraging, and tiring. Remember to remain in control of the animals. If they once learn to run away, that becomes a hard-to-break habit. A team of oxen should never realize that it can run away in the yoke. Most teamsters keep halters, ropes, and sometimes nose rings in the animals during the early training in order to maintain control. Yet, it is more productive to spend plenty of time working with the animals individually in a small enclosed area to accustom them to being handled

“During training you must be very patient and persistent. There will be occasions when you feel like giving the game away, you will feel as though bullock (oxen) driving is not for you. This is the period that separates the men from the boys. Boys chuck it – Men stay on!”

Arthur Cannon, **The Bullock Driver’s Handbook**, Australia

so when yoked they will be easier to control.

Teaching a Team to Respond in the Yoke

Whatever method of early training is used, the training should not advance beyond start and

stop until the animals have learned those commands. Training must be a sequential process. Each part of the training should prepare the animals for the next step.

Before yoking you should review your plan for which steer should be on what side based on their responsiveness in the halter. Once sides are chosen and training has begun, the animals should stay that way unless there is a good reason to change them. If one steer is slower or more balky, it may be best to put it on the nigh side where it can more easily be encouraged. On the other hand, if one is extremely fast and needs extra attention to stop and stand, it may need to be on the nigh side.

Yoking can be done as early as one week of age. I’ve seen teams that are only one month old that are already quite handy – responding to commands. At first you should simply yoke the team and lead it around, giving the command “whoa” and “get up.” The training sessions should be brief and often. It is better to work the team two or three times a day for very short periods rather than once a week for four or five hours. Only when they can be directed to start and stop, should you begin training the animals to turn and back up. Once these five basic commands are well understood and obeyed, additional commands can be given.

Training oxen should be an ongoing process throughout the lives of the animals. A teamster who continually challenges his/her team by teaching new commands will have a team that others will envy.

Basic Commands

Here is a list of the basic commands given to oxen, their uses, and some techniques for teaching them.

Whoa – The first command is by far the most important. The cattle should stop all movement

on simply hearing this command alone. The cattle should learn to stop whether you are in front, in back, or beside them. A team which has not learned this command is very dangerous in the yoke. This command is important in haltering animals, capturing them in pasture, hitching to and unhitching from loads, and when moving on roadways or logging trails. It is vital for the safety of you and the team that this command be clearly understood.

Get Up – Or other commonly used terms (such as step up, whahoosh, clicking to them, etc.) commands a team to move forward. Whatever your symbolic sound, it should be used consistently and should not be a term easily confused with other commands. This command also should work by voice only. Only occasionally should the whip be needed as a reminder or to wake up a steer that is not paying attention. When the command is given, the steers should move out together and start the load together. This is essential for pulling and it looks good.

Haw – This command is given to turn a team to the left. Since the teamster always stands on the left hand side of the team and the left turn is toward the teamster, this is more easily taught than the Gee turn.

Variations of this command often include “Come Here Haw” or Back Haw.” “Back Haw” is used to make a tight left turn. By using this combination, you back the nigh steer as the off steer comes around the turn. To teach a tight haw turn, use the whip to tap the nigh steer on the knees and the off steer on the rump. This command should become a voice command, and the whip should rarely be needed after training. A tap on the ground by the nigh ox will frequently remind it to back for a tight left.

Gee – This command (pronounced “G”) is given to turn a team to the right. This means the team must move away from the teamster who is on the

left. It is a harder command than “Haw” to teach, since the team is moving away from the teamster.

When training the team, walk in front and to the right of the team and have them follow you through the turn as you repeat the command. This should be done only early in the training. The teamster should soon be able to give the command from the left side of the team and have them turn right by voice command. The reason for this is that often the teamster cannot walk ahead of his steers through the turn. If not trained to turn by voice, they expect to simply follow the teamster through all the turns.

It is easier to teach the Gee turn using a whip with a lash attached. The off steer is tapped on the brisket and the nigh steer is tapped on the rump while the command is given.

Some teamsters have variations to this command. Many say “Gee-off” since the team is moving away from the teamster. “Back-gee” is used for tight right-hand turns. The nigh steer is told to “Gee” as the off steer is commanded to “Back Up.” In this way the backing of the off steer pulls the nigh steer sharply to the right.

“When giving orders be emphatic. No matter whether your tone is loud or soft, speak as though you have absolute confidence, and mean every word. If you appear not quite sure, the bullocks will notice it and play up. And remember, one good lash is better than a half dozen half hits.”

Arthur Cannon, **The Bullock Drivers Handbook**, Australia

Back Up – This command is very important to any team. Without it, hitching to wagons, sleds, or other equipment is more difficult.

After this command is given, it should be practiced in every workout. It is a good idea to

back the team 100 – 200 feet in one continuous motion. If the team learns to back up without hesitation, by voice command, you will have few problems hitching the team to a load. The oxen should learn to back onto a pole and to back up to hitch to a drag. They should back from the side, the front, or when the teamster is behind them.

One challenge is to keep them from spreading out as they back. Working with a fence along the off ox or backing down a hill will keep them together. Later, you can add a command, “Put In” to instruct them to move their rear ends closer to their teammates. Never hit the team in the face when this command is given. It is best to tap them on their knees or their brisket.

Stand – Tells the team to remain still until another command is given. Often “Whoa” is also used for this purpose. Ox teams are frequently required to stand still and at ease in the yoke for long periods of time with minimal attention. They should learn to stand without putting their heads down to eat and without pawing the ground.

You start this session by teaching the team to stop with “Whoa.” Then slowly move yourself away from them. If they try to follow, repeat the command, “Whoa/stand.” This will have to be done until well understood and then practiced routinely. As the animals become more trustworthy, you can try stepping out of their sight. But keep an eye on them. If they start to move you can say “Whoa” by voice or step out and reprimand them. Note that you should not leave the animals completely unattended in the yoke unless for very short periods where the animals are in no danger of injuring themselves.

This command is very useful when animals are in traffic, parades, ox-pulling contests, shows, or in the woodlot.

These basic commands should be learned by every ox team. They are relatively simple and easily taught. By using these commands a teamster can do almost anything needed. All these commands must be learned and well understood before beginning to teach a team to pull or before introducing other commands.

Training to Pull

Once the team is handy in the yoke they can be trained to pull. This can be done at any age. Teams as young as a few weeks can learn to pull a small sled or a dray made of lightweight wood. No elaborate sled or wagon is necessary to teach a team to pull. A common device used is an old car or truck tire with rocks on the inside. The chain is attached and larger tires can be added as the team grows.

Stoneboats are commonly used as various weights can be added or removed. These need not be elaborate. They can be made by bolting a few heavy planks together. A sled or scoot with a pole is ideal for training a team. The pole prevents the team from interfering with one another. It also aids in preventing the team from stepping over the chain when turning corners. The pole is less harsh on the animals’ legs if it rubs on them when turning corners.

Pulling is essential for every team of oxen. It is easy to teach the team if approached properly. There is nothing like having a team willingly pull a heavy load with everything they’ve got. To expect a team to dig in and pull hard, the teamster has to work the team regularly and be very patient.

Oxen are like athletes in many ways. To expect them to work hard they must be in condition, have regular exercise, and a training program. If worked hard one day or left idle for long periods, then expected to work, the animals will become sore and uncomfortable. When expected to work hard again, they may not want to work.

Teaching the team to pull is like lifting weights. The only way to become stronger or pull more weight is to practice and work hard. Light loads pulled frequently encourage the team and help keep them in shape, much like repetitions in a lifter's weight program. Like the weight lifter, oxen cannot be expected to work out constantly with the maximum amount they can pull. Use lighter weights to build strength and endurance. The team of oxen must build up to heavy loads slowly. They should only pull heavy loads when they are proficient with lighter loads. And then, only as often as necessary to keep them acquainted with working hard and really digging in.

Here are a few rules to keep in mind when teaching a team of oxen to pull.

Always:

- Start teaching a team on a very light load.
 - Make sure the team is able to start the load. If the team "bumps the load" (fails to pull it on their first try), make the load lighter before trying again.
 - Have the team pull short distances with frequent rests, especially at first. The frequent starts and stops are a great way to get the team used to starting a load.
 - When first teaching a team to pull, only have the team pull for a short amount of time, gradually making the workouts longer.
 - Make sure the yoke fits well before teaching the team to pull.
 - Only use the whip when really warranted. Young teams should never need a whip to start the load.
- Make sure the chain length is proper for each team.
 - Always try to "cut" the load to make starting easier.
 - Set the steer on the side you are turning towards away from the chain to avoid injury.
 - Hitch the load calmly; don't get the team nervous before hitching.
 - Make the team pull evenly.

Never:

- Overload a young team.
- Work the team where they could be injured.
- Overuse the whip on a young team.
- Work a young team if you are not in the mood to do so.
- Pull long distances without frequent rest stops.
- Overwork the young team.
- Use a yoke or bows that don't fit the team.
- Work the young team in deep snow, mud or rain.
- Turn corners too sharply causing the chain to rub on the steers' legs or get caught under the drag.
- Allow a team to stop unless directed to do so.

There are many aspects of pulling that can only be learned through experience. Teamsters interested in competition, particularly pulling, must realize that experience gives an edge in the pulling ring. This should by no means discourage novice teamsters from competing. They should realize that they and their novice teams have much to learn about pulling that comes only from experience.

Tricks to pulling that save time and effort for both the team and the teamster include:

1) Cutting the load – *This refers to starting a load on a slight angle to either side of the load rather than starting a load straight on. This way the load can be more easily started, often the hardest part of the pull.* Note that the steer on the side that you are turning towards should be close to the chain. The other steer should be a step away from the chain at its rear legs. In this way when the drag straightens out, the team is less likely to be injured from the chain.

2) Turning the stoneboat or a wagon with a pole – *It is very important when making sharp turns to keep the steers' legs off the pole or chain. Make the steers step their rear legs outward away from the chain or pole throughout the turn.*

A drag and cart can effectively turn 360 degrees by pivoting on one wheel, or the end of the drag, without ever touching the animals' legs to the pole or chain.

3) Length of the chain in pulling – *When in a heavy pull, never start with a slack chain.*

This can cause injury to the steers and/or break the yoke. The steers feel the slack chain and expect a light load or no load. They walk ahead and either hit the load and stop due to the shock, or lunge ahead and put a lot of stress on the yoke. Even the strongest yoke and bows can be broken in this way.

When hitching prior to a pull, there should be sufficient room behind the steers' rear feet to prevent them from hitting the front of the drag during the pull and enough distance to allow for turns. The only time a longer chain may be necessary is during logging operations. Longer chains make the pull harder. They do not lift the front of the drag as much as a short chain.

Special Tricks

A team of oxen can do many tasks or special tricks. As with other training, the team must learn one command at a time with the training kept as simple as possible.

Special tricks include:

1) Side stepping – Teaching the team to step sideways. This comes in very handy when hitching to logs and carts. It is also handy when you want a team to move away from trucks, barns, or yourself.

2) Riding steers – This is used more for show than anything else. Steers are often ridden while in the yoke with voice commands given from the steer's back.

3) Driving the team from behind – Comes in very handy in woodlots, doing farm chores, or working from a wagon. You must rely on voice commands almost 100%. The team must be very trustworthy. No ropes or bridles are used, yet many teams can learn to be driven quite effectively from behind.

4) Walking without a yoke or halters – If the team can do this, they are very trustworthy and have been trained well. This comes in handy when catching teams at pasture or walking the team to waterholes. It is used by 4H teamsters to show how exceptionally well a team is trained.

The list of tasks oxen can be trained to do is long. If the rules are followed, a team of oxen has limitless possibilities.

Correcting Problems

There are many problems that may arise while training a team of oxen. Here are a few common problems and how to correct them.

Jumping chain – *The steers get on the wrong side of the chain and turn around, facing the load.*

This is caused by pulling too heavily or lack of control. It can be corrected by pulling with a pole or using lighter loads.

Bumping a load – *The team pushes forward; when they find the load heavy they stop and back up.* This is due to pulling too heavy, too hard, or for too long a distance between stops. Pull lighter loads to build the team's confidence.

Turning the yoke – *The team pivots from the yoke by swinging their rear ends around in opposite directions until the yoke and bow is upside down. The team is facing the load and the nigh steer on the right and the off on the left.* Prevent turning the yoke by using a smaller yoke that won't allow the team to turn the yoke and keeps the steers from turning their rear ends out. Also, their laying down in the yoke is an opportunity to learn to turn the yoke.

Hauling out – *The steers pull away from each other in the yoke. Their feet are angled so they trip each other, and they pull away from each other at the head and neck.* This becomes a habit, looks bad, and interferes with the normal movement of the team. This can be corrected by pulling their heads together with a chain or tying their heads to the center of the yoke so the team cannot pull away from each other.

Shying – *A team avoids a particular object or teamster. Most often this results from a bad experience.* The team must trust the teamster before they will get over shying. A team may shy away from loud noises, lights, or unexpected actions; these should be expected. However, they should never move away from the teamster. They become shy for specific reasons such as excessive abuse or improper handling.

“See, in other words, you’ve got to show them, you’re a better man than they are. And until you do, you can’t do nothing with ’em. And if you one time get ’em showed that you’re boss, that’s the end of the trouble you’ll have with them.”

Millard Buchanan, **Breaking and Training Oxen**, Foxfire

Chapter 5 Conclusion

Anyone training oxen will benefit from the experiences of other teamsters. Every teamster will work and train their animals using slightly different techniques, cues, and methods. Seek out other teamsters, learn to compare and discuss methods of working cattle. Learn from the experience of others, and learn from the cattle.

Other than starting with young calves, and being patient, consistent, and firm, there is no one technique that will work on all cattle. Cattle are so individually different, there will always be a team that will challenge even the most experienced teamster.

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