

## Breaking a Calf

Written by Cathy Billenstein "Red"

We've all pretty much heard about the horse whisperer approach to breaking horses. At our place, we use the cow whisperer method! We've found that the gentle approach to breaking calves has worked the best for us. Not only does it produce calm animals but it is also the safest way for us.



I know there are many different ways you can use to break a calf. There is the flat out who's the strongest method, tying them up to a tractor, the "they never really are broke" or by using a donkey. All work well, but for us, we like the "red" approach.

We typically start out when the calves are still very young. I like to begin when they are about three months old. They are starting to eat some creep feed at this point but are still small enough so that they're not doing to drag you through the barn. Now, I realize that everyone's setup is different so you need to find out what works best for you and your operation. We typically offer the calves creep feed in a separate pen from the cows. They seem to enjoy getting away from the cows and we'll often find them lying in there. Also if they are away from the cows you don't have to worry about an overly aggressive mother cow trying to protect her calf.

We begin by sitting in the creep pen with the calves. I sometimes will just sit in there and talk to them. Best therapy for the price in my opinion! If they're tame enough, I try to brush or pet them too.

Next, we'll put the halter on the calf. Make sure it's a comfortable fit. If there is rubbing under the chin or on the top of the nose you can buy nose pads to keep the sore areas from appearing. We tie the calf up so that they can move around but not so that they can get hurt. Also if you're tying up more than one, make sure they're spaced out far enough

so they don't kick each other. We tie them up the first time for only a short while, usually just 30 minutes. When we tie them up at first, we keep the head level & don't give them enough rope to lie down. If possible, brush or pet them during this time.

We try to tie them up every other day at first for at least a half hour. After a while begin increasing the time by 15 minutes. Always are petting, talking & brushing the calf. Move slowly around them. Try not to yell or raise your voice. Don't hit or kick them. If you keep a calm cool head they'll respond.

After the time has increased to an hour we start tying them up every day. We still keep the head level but after an hour we will give them enough rope so that they can lie down. Usually we will keep them this way for several hours. Whenever you go in with them, carry a brush & start working on their legs gently. This gets them used to the legs being groomed, which is one of the touchiest places on some calves.

At this point, we may wean the calves. During the time they are being weaned, you may want to hold off on tying them up since they will be under a great deal of stress. After about a week of being away from mom you can start tying them up again.

After they have been tied up for a couple of weeks, we start tying their heads up a little higher. This serves several purposes. First it teaches the calf to hold their head up in the ring. It helps so the shower is not fighting with the calf in the ring to keep its head up and reduces overall stress on all. Second, it is good practice for display purposes for sales & shows where you want the calf to look the best. Also it helps when it comes time to clip or fit the calf, they are used to standing still with their head up. We try to tie them up this way daily for about 2 hours. Then we allow them enough rope to lie down.

All during this time, we are still petting, brushing and talking to the calves. You should be getting to a point where they are starting to trust you and enjoy the attention. Still keep calm and try not to get overly excited around them. Sometimes it is a good idea to have a radio playing in the barn so that they become used to music or strange noises. Also if you have visitors have them come in the barn so the calves get used to strangers. Have them also pet the calves so they get used to different hands and voices.

I'll start using a scotch comb on them at this point. Many calves love the comb but some are sensitive of it especially on their legs. Gently start out with a light pressure until they are comfortable. Some calves it's a trial and error approach until you find out what works best for them. The blunt teeth combs I've found work very well for those that don't like the sharp teeth of the others.

You can begin washing when you are comfortable with the calf and it with you. Once again, just take it slowly & calmly. If you've been brushing the calf all along, it shouldn't be too caked with manure and the process won't be too painful. Also when blowing out the calf for the first time, turn the blower on so the calf can first hear it and then approach the calf with the blower.

I hope this method works for you. It has helped us out in our calf breaking process without injuries to the calves or us. Just remember to keep a cool head, take it slow, don't strike the calves, try to keep your voice low & give them lots of attention. You'll have a gentle calf that a young person can show and you can be proud that you did it yourself!