

COW CONTROL

CATTLE WORK ISN'T JUST FOR COWBOYS.

Learn how your horse's position influences a cow's movement, and how to use the horse's herd behaviors to dictate his speed and direction.

THERE ARE COUNTLESS TECHNIQUES, drills and gimmicks people try to use to train their horses. Some are effective, while others actually confuse the horse and rider more than they help.

While working cattle on the open range, in their natural environment, I spent a lot of time studying how my horse's position in relation to a cow influenced the way the cow reacts and moves. As a result, I found that for me one of the best training tools is the cow.

As herd animals, horses and cattle have several social and behavioral similarities, and can relate to one another through mental and physical forms of pressure and relief. They both have comfort zones, or "flight zones," which I'll describe later. If that zone is penetrated, it causes the animal to engage its self-preservation mechanism and either flee or fight. Prey animals also seek security from what they perceive to be a potential threat by moving with the herd or near their mothers.

If you understand the physical and psychological effects your horse has on a cow, you can use the knowledge and experience he already has to your advantage. I see several parallels in what people refer to as herd instincts and cow sense. Herd instinct refers to how your horse relates to other horses, while cow sense is how he relates to cattle. If you can identify the two and understand the connection, then you can allow your horse to make the association, tapping into his previous experiences controlling the speed, direction and position of another animal, as well as himself.

Using principles he already understands, and presenting them in a way he can find relief, minimizes confusion and fear, and can develop your horse's cow sense, motivation and confidence in a very short time. However, it's the responsibility of you, the rider, to help your horse connect these herd principles to the cow.

In the second installment of this six-part series on developing a confident cow horse, you'll learn the basics of reading cattle using my flight-zone and balance-point theories, and discover how they influence a cow's movement and can be used to enhance your horse's handiness.

Before we begin, I'd like to emphasize that reading cattle takes experience and intuition. I can offer pointers to help you recognize when a cow is about to move and where she'll go, but I can't give you

STORY BY MARTIN BLACK
WITH JENNIFER DENISON

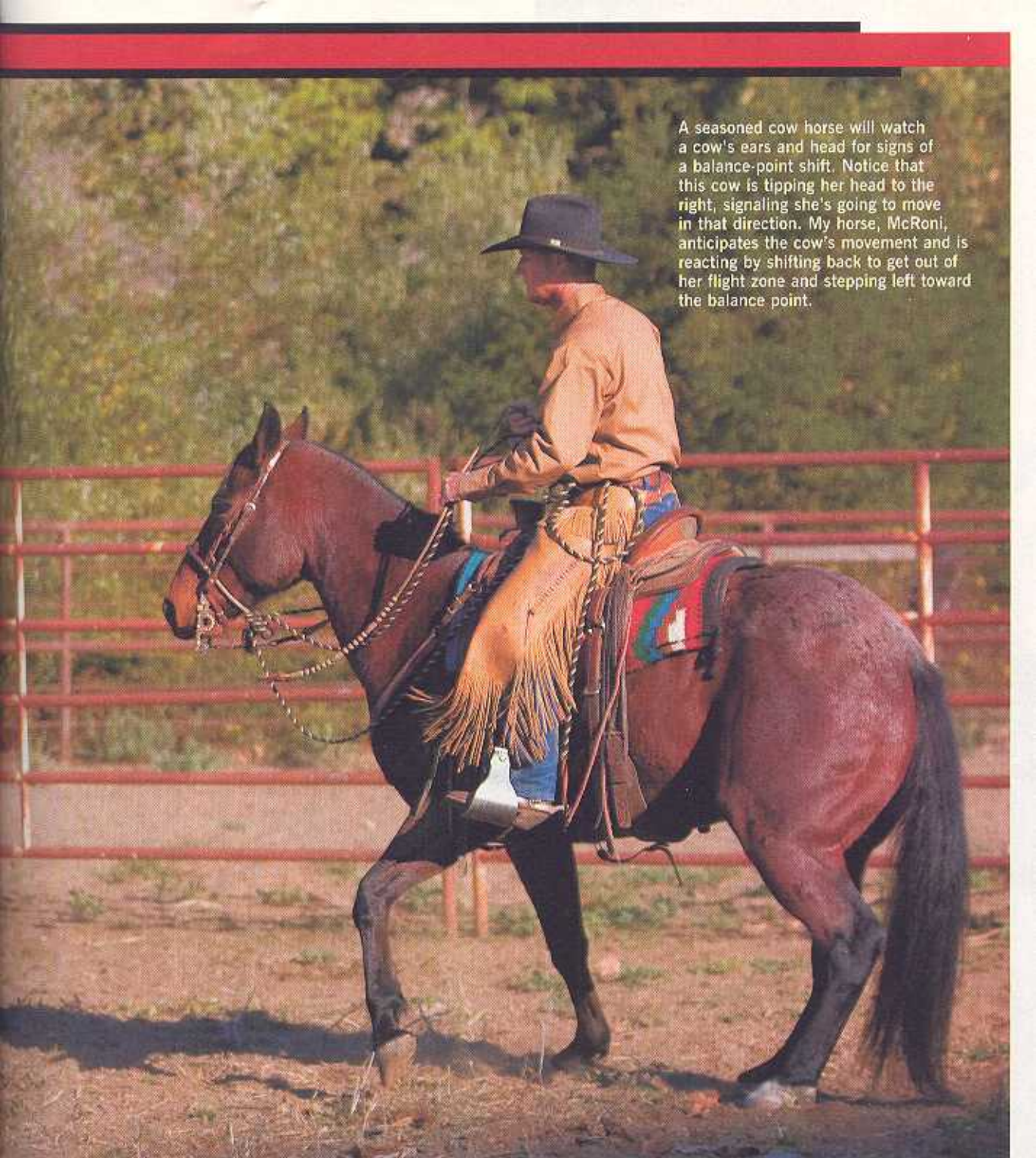
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a step-by-step formula. It takes practice and learning from your mistakes.

I also want to point out that these principles aren't just for cutting or working cow horses; they can be applied to roping, team penning and everyday ranch work. I've even used them to train racehorses, reiners and jumpers. It's important, however, that you know how to stay out of your horse's way and encourage him to sidepass, back up, and maneuver your horse's front- and hindquarters. (See "The Power of Position," January 2008 *Western Horseman*.) The less you interfere with your horse, the more he can do what he already knows how to do or what comes to him naturally.

A man wearing a dark cowboy hat and a tan long-sleeved shirt is riding a brown horse in a corral. The horse is facing left. The rider is wearing a colorful patterned saddle blanket and a tan saddle with fringed skirts. The background shows a red metal fence and green trees.

A seasoned cow horse will watch a cow's ears and head for signs of a balance-point shift. Notice that this cow is tipping her head to the right, signaling she's going to move in that direction. My horse, McRoni, anticipates the cow's movement and is reacting by shifting back to get out of her flight zone and stepping left toward the balance point.

Flight Zone

By definition, the flight zone is the area around an animal that, when something approaches too close, the animal feels the need to move to maintain a safe distance. As I mentioned earlier, both horses and cattle have flight zones.

If you've ever watched a Border Collie work cattle or sheep, you probably noticed that the dog runs toward the stock until the dog senses the stock's flight zone. Then the dog will turn hard and circle around the stock on the outer edge of the flight zone. Next, the dog carefully moves closer to the stock, calculating the effect of penetrating the flight zone to get the stock to move, and retreats to get it to slow

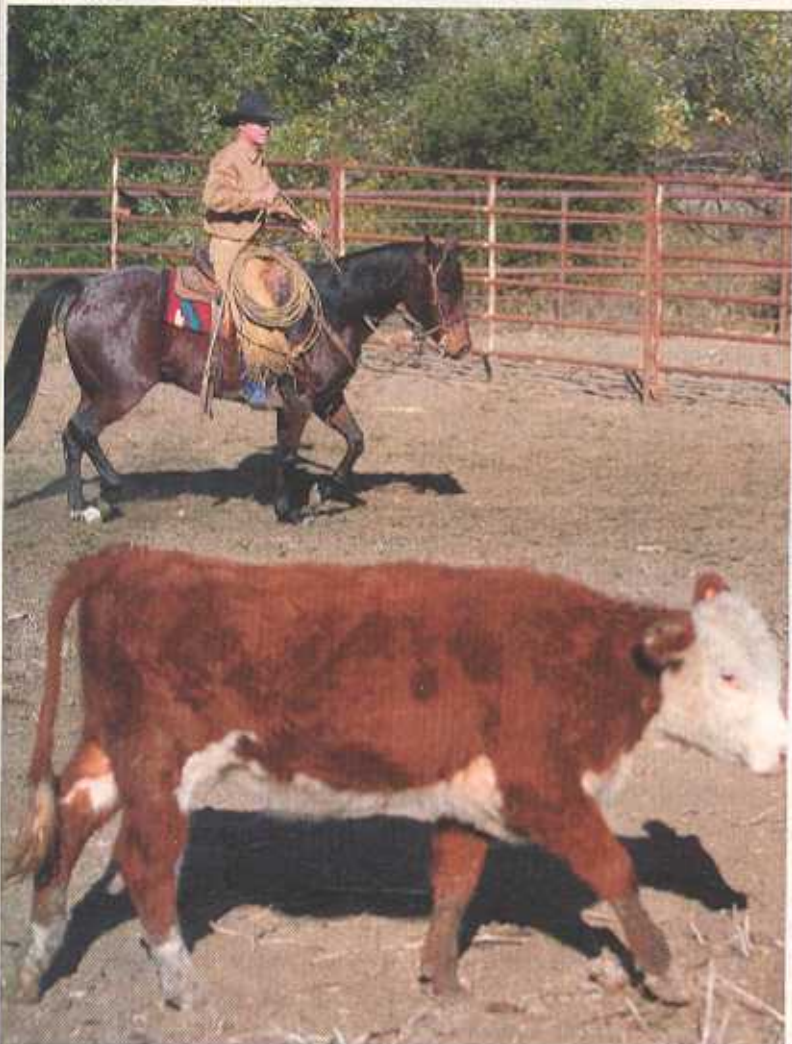
down or stop. This is a good example of the flight-zone principle.

When a horse approaches a cow, she engages her self-preservation instincts and moves away from the horse. If the horse remains in her flight zone, she'll speed up. If the horse retreats out of the flight zone, the cow will start to slow down and eventually stop when she no longer perceives the horse as a threat.

For example, as you approach the flight zone of a cow lying in the pasture, she'll start to feel a little threatened and rise to her feet. If you inch deeper into the zone, she'll turn and walk away from you. And, if you continue to invade her space, or move quickly and aggressively, she'll take off trotting or



McRoni is feeling his way around the outside of the cow's flight zone. When we pass beyond the balance point and penetrate the flight zone, we'll cause the cow to turn into us.



To turn a cow away, you need to be in position on or behind her balance point.



The cow can shift the balance point with one step, and your horse may need to take 10 to get to the new balance point.

running. The deeper you go into the cow's flight zone, the more intensely she'll respond.

Keep in mind, however, that a cow's breed and the amount she's been handled can influence her flight zone. Flighty cattle and/or those that haven't been worked have a larger flight zone than those with calm dispositions and that have been handled.

Also, there will be times when the cow will come toward you. This can put you inside the flight zone, even if you're stationary or retreating. Regardless of the circumstances that put you there, the deeper you're in the flight zone, the more flight or fight you create, and the farther out you are the less reaction you'll cause.

Balance Point

Now, imagine the Border Collie from the previous example as it moves into the cattle's flight zone. The dog enters the flight zone on the balance point, which is the point at which the stock will move straight away from the dog. If the stock goes to the right, it's because the dog is to the left of the balance point and vice versa.

If the dog moves some stock toward the gate, the stock will want to return to the security of the herd and will move back and forth, trying to turn back toward the herd. To block the animal's movement, the dog maneuvers side to side, blocking the animal's path. As the dog teeters more to one side, or beyond the balance point, the animal turns in the other direction.

The balance point is the position from which you can influence an animal to change direction or stop. When your horse enters a cow's flight zone and encourages her to move, she'll choose a direction in which to go. If you block that path, she'll usually turn her head in the direction of another route. That's your signal that the balance point is shifting. If your horse is not within her flight zone, but is teetering on her balance point, she'll stop, because you're not motivating her move.

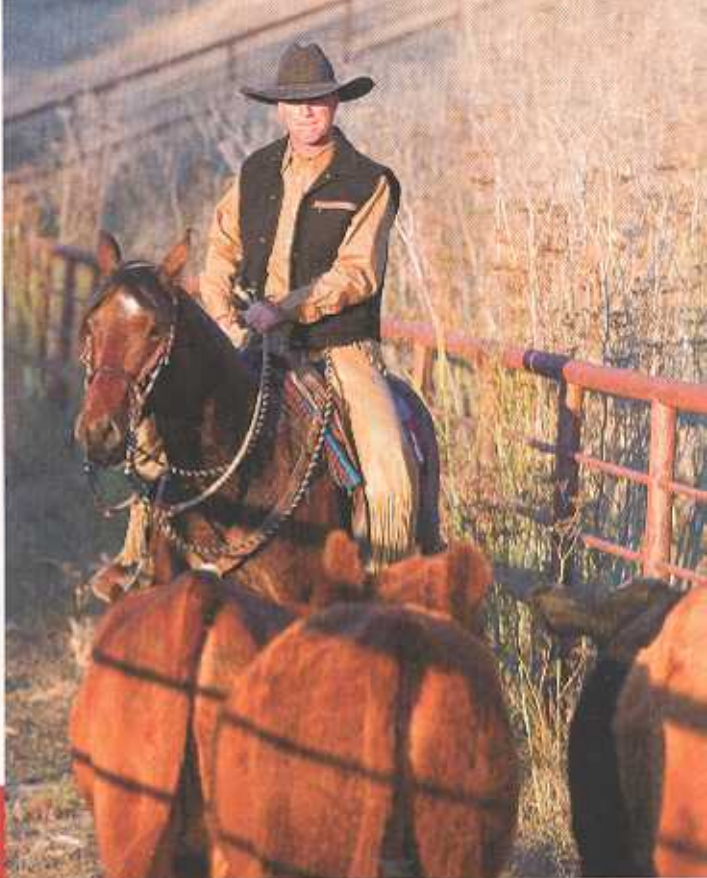
Thinking of this concept another way, imagine you're in a stream with a beach ball, with the current pulling the ball toward you. If you apply finger pressure in the center of the ball to stop it from coming toward you, it won't go right or left—it's balanced on your finger. This is the balance point. If you move your finger to the right of the balancing point, the stream, which represents the herd in this analogy, will pull the ball (cow) to the left and vice versa.

Making the Connection

To effectively work cattle out of a herd, you and your horse need to learn to read a cow's body language and anticipate her flight zone and balance-point shifts so you can direct her movement where you want her to go and at the desired speed. This is also a good exercise to enhance your horse's focus, reaction time and versatility.

As I explained last month, my training philosophy involves teaching a horse discipline and motivating him through self-induced pressure and relief. To apply those concepts to the principles of flight zone and balance point, refer to the diagrams on page 67. These illustrations offer a good way to visualize flight zone and balance point. (For more on the A-pen, see "Training Inside the Triangle," February 2007 *Western Horseman*.) Think

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Top: Subtle body language, such as the direction your horse's nose is pointed, can influence a cow's movement, especially in the close confines of an alley. Here, my horse's nose is tipped into the alley. The cattle perceive it as a threatening act of dominance and won't pass by the horse. **Bottom:** If I tip my horse's nose to the outside, the horse is seen as submissive and the cattle will proceed down the alley.

Martin Black



A FIFTH-GENERATION Dwyhee County, Idaho, rancher and horseman, Martin Black started training working cow horses at a young age, using Spanish-California-style horsemanship. He worked with some of the best vaqueros and horsemen in Idaho, Oregon and Nevada, including his grandfather, Albert Black; his great-uncle, Paul Black; Tom Dorrance; Ray Hunt; Gene Lewis; and Tom Marvel, all of whom influenced his gentle training methods and equine intuition.

Black has conducted horsemanship, colt-starting, ranch-roping and cattle-working clinics throughout North America, as well as in Australia, Europe and Brazil, and advocates using cow work to train horses.

Between clinics, Black travels between his home in Idaho and his ranch in Sanger, Texas. He still starts horses for the public and ranches along the West Coast, trains racehorses on the East Coast, and buckaroos on the Alford Ranch in Oregon. He also offers schools at the Alford Ranch and his Texas facility.

Black recently released a three-part DVD series on taking a horse through the three phases of bridle-horse training, reviewed on page 57 of this issue. For more information on Black and his DVDs, visit martinblack.net.

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Sometimes, the easiest way to move a cow softly is to move your horse's hindquarters toward her. Then, your horse's forward motion moves out of her flight zone.

of the flight zone as determining position on a latitude line, and balance point determining position on a longitudinal line. The point where the lines intersect determines the position your horse needs to be in to stop the cow.

How does this create pressure and relief on the horse? The cow will stand still when

your horse is in the right position—that is, out of the cow's flight zone and on the balance point. When the cow is relaxed and quiet, allow your horse to relax and stand quietly. Don't distract him by pulling on the reins, kicking him or spurring. This lack of pressure is a major motivator for him to stay in position with that cow.



When your horse is focused on the cow, staying out of her flight zone and on her balance point, offer him relief. That way, he'll come to associate the cow with comfort and security.

If he loses control of the cow, or ends up out of the intersection shown in Illustration B, apply an impressionable amount of pressure with your reins, legs or spurs to hurry him out of the cow's flight zone. This will develop the horse's flight zone to get away from the cow. If the horse relates the trouble to being close to the cow and the relief to the cow slowing down, he'll learn to stay away from the cow to stay out of trouble. Once your horse is out of the cow's flight zone, get back on the balance point and, when the cow stops, let your horse stand calm and relaxed.

At first, your horse might not make the right choice, but reward any motivation to remain in position by gently redirecting him.

With consistent practice, he'll associate the security of being out of the cow's flight zone and on the balance point, plus he'll recognize—and try to avoid—the discomfort related to being out of position.

Horses understand at a young age how to deal with the intimidation inflicted on them by other horses and the threat of predators, and how to find security by positioning themselves in relation to their mothers or in the herd. This is a practiced problem-

solving method for them, and you can apply the same principle to cow work. Your horse perceives the comfort and relief in relation to the cow's flight zone and balance point. When applied properly, the lesson your horse learns is all cow related, much like the horse-related lessons learned growing up, instead of needing to develop a sense of how man rationalized things.

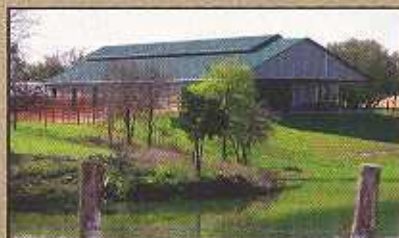
As the horse gains experience, cow work will come naturally to him and he'll aggressively seek the cow, lowering his head to

look the cow in the eye, pinning his ears, watching and dominating the cow. This is the mark of a confident cow horse. 🐾

Jennifer Denison is a Western Horseman senior editor. For more tips on using cattle to train and condition your horse, visit westernhorseman.com. To order Black's DVD Working Cattle in the "A" Pen—An Introduction, visit martinblack.net. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.

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DIAGRAM A

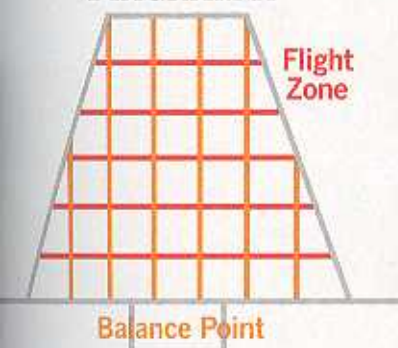
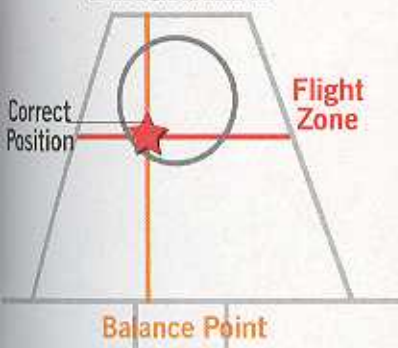


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