

On the Offense

Get ahead of the game in ranch work and score points in cow-horse competition with this new take on tracking and turning a cow.

STORY BY MARTIN BLACK WITH JENNIFER DENISON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DARRELL DODDS

WORKING A COW, whether it's on a ranch or in an arena, is akin to a competitive team sport. You and your horse are on one team, and the cow is your opponent. Each team assumes offensive or defensive roles.

Think of the cow as the opposing player. The cow's action dictates your horse's reaction, and vice versa. Also, your horse's position can influence the outcome of a play. An experienced cow horse can read, anticipate and out-think his opponent, and adjust his position so that the play works to his advantage, not the cow's.

If properly prepared like a professional athlete, your horse can learn to read and anticipate a cow's next move as well as or better than can most people. That's because a horse and cow speak the same language.

Raised in a herd environment, horses and cattle develop self-preservation instincts from a young age. One of the first lessons a young foal or calf learns is to follow its mother or the herd for security. As the animal ages, it begins to play aggressively with herdmates, with one animal expressing dominant body lan-

guage until the other submits, thus beginning each animal's offensive and defensive experiences. For example, when a horse lowers his head, pins his ears and makes a dominant movement toward a cow, the cow understands that the horse is threatening her.

To establish clear communication for your horse to handle the cow using this method, you must do the following: 1. present the offensive and defensive plays in a way your horse understands and can relate to past experiences; 2. build his confidence to call the right play; and 3. avoid distracting him from the cow by moving the reins, spurring him or needlessly shifting your weight in the saddle.

In this article, the third in a six-part series, you'll learn about offense, situations in which a horse is being aggressive and moving toward the cow, such as when tracking, circling or pushing her down a fence for a turn. In this instance, the horse is in the cow's flight zone and positioned in accordance to her balance point to drive her forward. (For more information on flight zone and balance point, see "Cow Control," February 2008 *Western Horseman*.)

**COW-
HORSE
CONFIDENCE**
MARTIN
BLACK

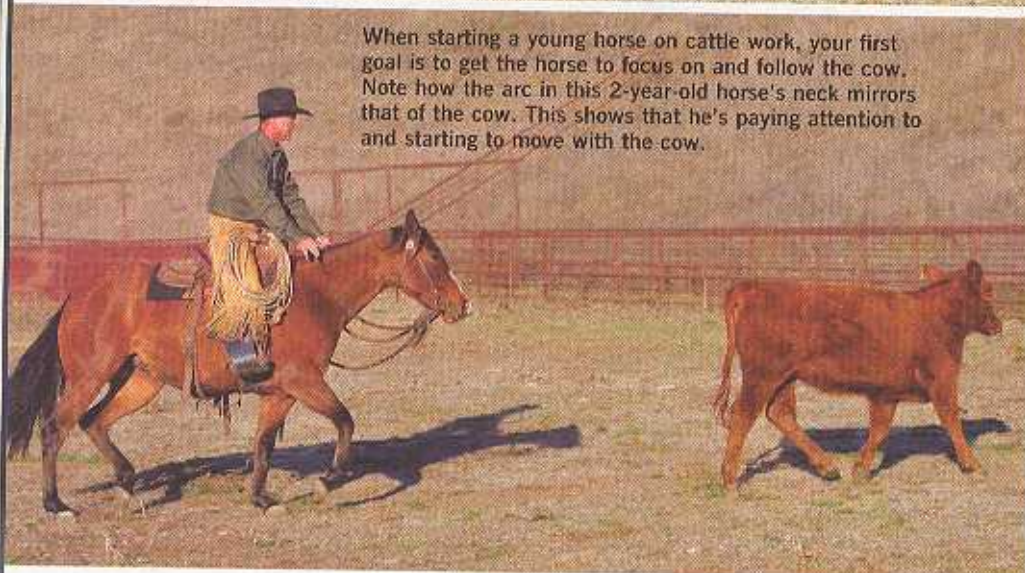


A confident cow horse reads, anticipates and out-thinks a cow with little or no influence from the rider. Here, my hands are over my horse's mane in a supportive position, but I'm not asking him to do any more than he's doing on his own.

If your horse is paying attention to the cow, he'll be in sync with her, and his footfall sequence will mirror hers, even this far from her.



When starting a young horse on cattle work, your first goal is to get the horse to focus on and follow the cow. Note how the arc in this 2-year-old horse's neck mirrors that of the cow. This shows that he's paying attention to and starting to move with the cow.



Get Back on Track

Ask your horse to trot or slow legs behind the cow, using her flight zone to keep her moving forward. When your horse's attention is on the cow, indicated by him watching and moving with the cow, relax your legs and ride on a loose rein, as though you're not on his back, so he feels relief. Remember that your horse doesn't have to be right on the cow's tail to focus on the animal. You must learn to recognize the slightest indication he's thinking about the cow, even if he's 20 feet or farther away from her.

If your horse isn't focused on the cow, or decides to move away from her, allow him to do so for a few steps. Once he's committed to making the mistake, apply pressure with your reins, legs and spurs—as though a predator is going to get him—and redirect his attention back on the cow.

Giving your horse the benefit of the doubt and seeing if he'll find the solution on his own, rather than being quick to correct him, promotes confidence and good judgment. Correcting him too soon can develop intimidation and self-doubt.

Imagine that a rope connects your horse's head to the cow's tail. When your horse leaves the cow, the rope tightens and the horse hits the end of it within a few steps. That simulated pull at the end of the rope offers him relief when he's pointed back toward the cow. Experiencing discomfort when he moves away from the cow and relief when he's with the cow will motivate your horse to seek the good feeling associated with staying close to the cow.

Make the Comfort Connection

Anytime your horse moves toward the cow, using the flight zone to dictate her speed and the balance point to keep her moving in the direction you want, he's moving offensively. Common examples of offensive maneuvers include fence work in ranch-horse versatility and reined-cow-horse competition, or tracking a cow to rope her.

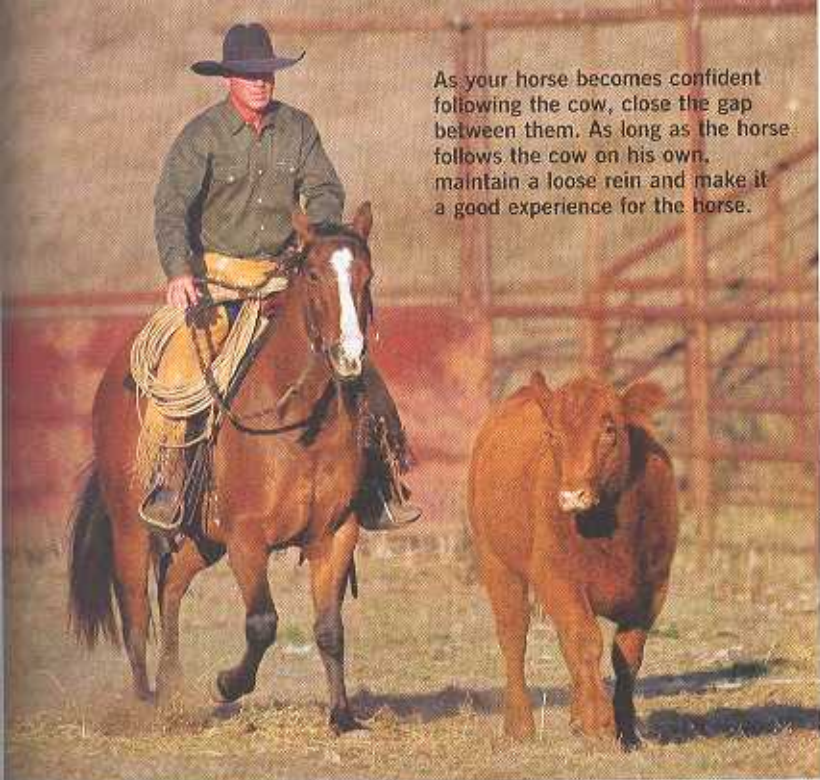
If the cow challenges your horse to return to the herd, resisting the urge to move forward, your horse will assume a defensive position, blocking the cow enough times that she submits to his control. We'll discuss defense as it relates to cow work in depth next month.

Teaching a young horse to track a cow is the most elementary form of offense. Before you begin the mechanics of teaching a horse to track, stop to think about how it relates to something already familiar to a horse, such as his relationship with his dam, or herdmates. As a foal, your horse instinctively sought security from his mother, and played offense and defense

with his herdmates. When he felt threatened, he'd return to his mother's side. You can tap into this past experiences, using pressure and relief, to teach your horse to lock on to a cow just as he did when rating his mother.

Begin by selecting a cow that will move away as your horse approaches, but isn't too flighty. On a young horse that hasn't had any exposure to cattle, guide the horse toward the cow. Any time he's pointed in the cow's direction relax your rein and leg pressure, so he feels relief. If he turns away from the cow, direct him a little more intently and use leg pressure and even a pop on the rear to speed up his movement. Release that pressure when he moves toward the cow.

At this point, you're not asking your horse to track the cow, just to make the connection that the cow offers him the same feelings of comfort and security as his mother did, and that moving away from the cow results in discomfort. Once your horse makes this association, he's tracking a cow on his own.



As your horse becomes confident following the cow, close the gap between them. As long as the horse follows the cow on his own, maintain a loose rein and make it a good experience for the horse.

back and get aggressive. This is a good sign the horse is getting confident. When your horse shows such confidence, give him a recess and set up the situation later. If you overwork your horse, you'll discourage him from wanting to play the game.

The trick, as with other things you teach your horse, is to determine how much is enough. You don't want to do too much, but if you don't ask something of him, nothing will happen. You need to find the most effective balance, and that's something only your horse can teach you.

Apply the Offensive Plays

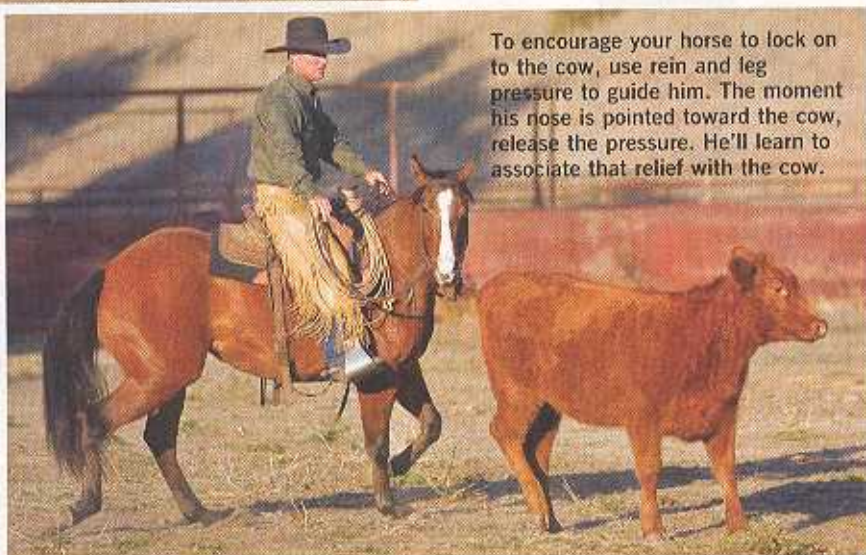
When your horse instinctively follows a cow on a loose rein, you can start to

This sounds logical, but it's the opposite of what some people do. We see riders who are quiet with their hands and legs until their horses get close to cattle. Then, they start to kick and spur to keep their horses right with the cattle. The result: the horse associates being close to the cow with discomfort, because there's more pressure from the rider when he's with the cow than when he's away from it. Don't use pressure to direct him on the cow. Use pressure only when he commits to leaving the cow.

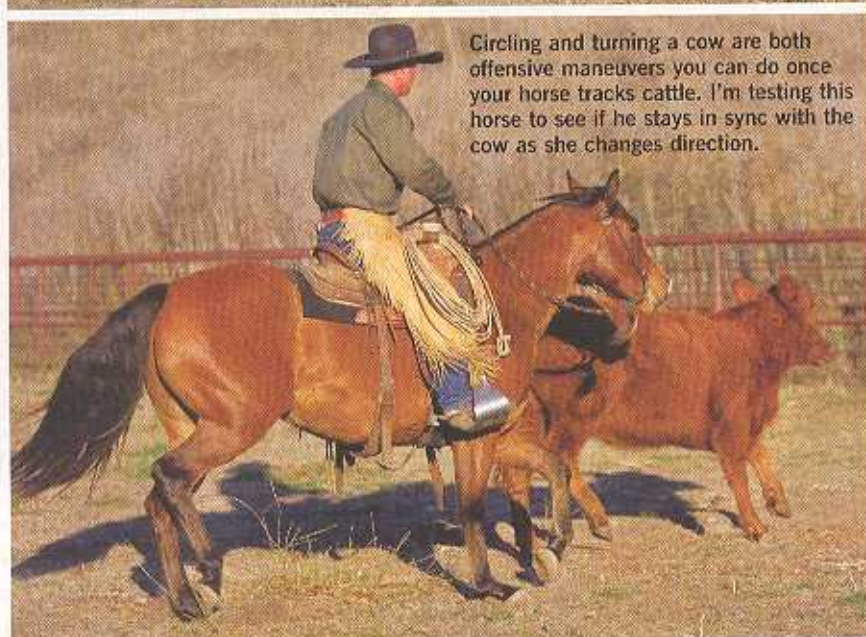
This approach yields quick results for most horses, because you're capitalizing on a behavior or instinct a horse already understands. He just needs you to connect it to the cow. The horse learns to go toward the cow's tail for comfort and security anytime he feels pressure.

Usually, in just a few rides a young horse goes from being unsure of what he's supposed to do with the cow to being aggressive, pinning his ears and going toward the cow. If the horse feels good, hunting the cow can become a game to him, and he'll start getting more aggressive and quicker to get to the cow. When this happens, you don't want to overwork your horse to the point he's too tired or loses interest.

Some horses may be afraid of cattle or just uninterested, but once they learn they can dominate the cow, they'll pin their ears



To encourage your horse to lock on to the cow, use rein and leg pressure to guide him. The moment his nose is pointed toward the cow, release the pressure. He'll learn to associate that relief with the cow.



Circling and turning a cow are both offensive maneuvers you can do once your horse tracks cattle. I'm testing this horse to see if he stays in sync with the cow as she changes direction.

increase the speed at which you track the cow and even start circling the cow or turning it along the fence. These are all forms of offense.

To increase the cow's speed down the fence, ride deeper into her flight zone, staying slightly behind the balance point. While doing fence work, some people train their horses to stay inside a cow, a cutting term that means behind the balance point. They use the shoulder or another point on the cow that corresponds with a specific point on the horse, instead of reading the balance point. Your horse may need to

go beyond the shoulder, neck or other physical point on the cow to get past the balance point and turn her.

If the cow focuses on the arena corner coming up, she may change the balance point and stop. However, if she's focused more on the horse than the arena corner, she'll go around the corner, or over or through the fence. Cutters and turn-back riders use this tactic to teach their horses to stay inside or behind the balance point, rather than teaching their horses to control the cow by going past or outside the balance point.

When the cow shifts the balance point and turns back, remember to keep your weight in your outside stirrup to stay out of his way and to maximize his efficiency, as described in part one of this series (January 2008 *Western Horseman*). Give your horse an opportunity to turn the cow and get back into position on his own. If he doesn't, apply pressure to encourage him to get right back with the cow.

Soon, he'll lock onto the cow and follow it wherever it goes, without you constantly guiding him. This is the focus and lightness you want in a winning teammate. 🐾

Martin Black



A fifth-generation Owyhee 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 for ranches along the West Coast, trains racehorses on the East Coast, and buckaroos on the Alvord Ranch in Oregon. He also offers schools at the Alvord Ranch and at his Texas facility.

For more information on Black and his DVDs, visit martinblack.net.

If a horse is behind the cow, he needs to move forward into position on the balance point. When a horse is out of position, as McRoni is here, his feet aren't in sync with the cow's feet and her ears are forward, indicating that she's looking to get away.



A seasoned cow horse, like McRoni, will want to be with the cow and control her by using her flight zone and balance point. The cow will then submit.



Note how McRoni and the cow's feet are in sync. Also notice that the cow's ears are no longer forward, indicating she's giving in to the 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.