

Develop a Strong DEFENSE

Here's how to give your horse the judgment and self-assurance he needs to keep cattle from crossing the line.

STORY BY MARTIN BLACK WITH JENNIFER DENISON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DARRELL DODDS

LAST MONTH, WE DISCUSSED how working cattle is similar to a team sport, such as football. You and your horse are on one side of the scrimmage line, and the cow is on the other. The herd, or the "goal," is behind you. Also like football, each team is either on offense or defense. The cow's movement and position with regard to the herd, gate or other "goal" determines which role your horse must play.

When your horse is in the cow's flight zone and positioned in accordance to her balance point, driving her forward, he's on the offensive team. (For more information on flight zone and balance point, see "On the Offense," March 2008 *Western Horseman*). The cow relates the horse's aggressive body language to lessons she learned as a young calf in the herd, senses the horse is threatening her and eventually submits.

Experience develops confidence and savvy judgment, and with consistently positive experiences your cow horse will learn to dominate the cow and will find that encouraging. He'll develop an interest in controlling the cow, reading her body language, anticipating her actions, and gauging his position in relation to her flight zone and balance point to control her movement.

For you and your horse to have an effective offense, however, you must develop a strong defense, which is the premise of this article, the fourth in a six-part series.

Offensive and Defensive Strategies

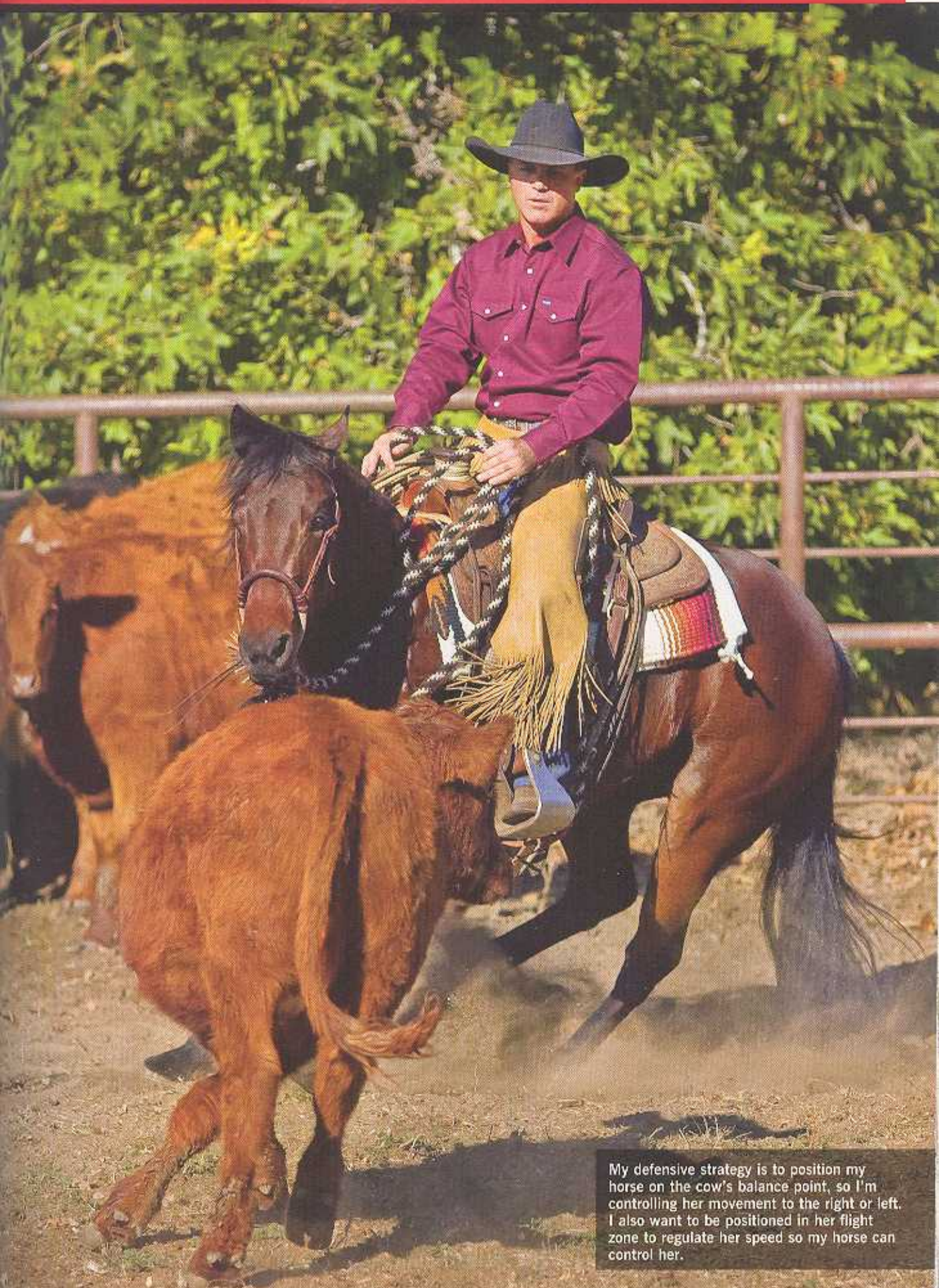
In sports, defense is the art of preventing an opponent from entering your territory. The term holds similar meaning in horsemanship and stockmanship. You apply defensive plays while cutting, boxing or sorting cattle, and when you have to separate a cow from the herd while the other animals remain behind you. Your objective is to keep the cow from coming back to the herd, while the cow's mission is to get past you, back to her security zone.

If the cow does blow past your horse, you have a weak defense. The key to defense is to position your horse on the cow's balance point, so you don't allow her to move to the right or left. You also want to be in the cow's flight zone so you can regulate her speed to the point your horse can control her. Your horse can control the cow by keeping the flight zone and balance point in sync with each other and with his experience level. Whether you're cutting or working cattle out of the rodear, this is the most efficient and stress-free system I've found to work cattle.

Think of the cow as the player with the ball. If you're in offensive mode, driving a cow forward into a corral, down a fence line or away from the herd for any other reason, and you get

out of position, the cow will most likely head back toward the herd, or "goal." To prevent that from happening, your horse must assume a defensive role immediately to block and stop the cow. In some cases, this

**COW-
HORSE
CONFIDENCE
MARTIN
BLACK**



My defensive strategy is to position my horse on the cow's balance point, so I'm controlling her movement to the right or left. I also want to be positioned in her flight zone to regulate her speed so my horse can control her.

might require taking only one step backward or turning and taking a step forward to get back on the balance point to direct the cow.

But, if your horse doesn't go on the defense when needed, you risk losing the cow and might have to run a mile to get back into position with her. Such inefficiencies are signs of a weak defense and will take you out of contention in cow-horse competition. On the ranch, this will stress the cattle, spend your horse's energy and cost you valuable time.

Growing up on a ranch in southwestern Idaho, I had to learn to do more with less. I rode several green horses, and the high-desert terrain was brushy and rocky, so it was critical to get a horse in the right position to get the response needed from the cow or cattle. If you were out of position, you had to speed up your horse and ride through environmental obstacles.

I learned quickly that to maneuver a cow like a Border Collie, even if it took five minutes to move around her, I had to position my horse in the cow's flight zone and on her balance point. If the cow started to move too fast as we entered her flight zone, we'd back off, adjust to a new balance point, then re-enter the flight zone for the speed and direction needed to keep her moving.

It was critical to plan ahead and maintain control of the cow, because if you made a mistake and the cow escaped, you might have had to spend hours or days riding big country to get the same opportunity with the cow again. But this gave you time to analyze ways to get things right the first time and do things more efficiently, with the least stress on the cattle.

To effectively work cattle, you first must be able to distinguish if your horse is on offense or defense. Remember that offense

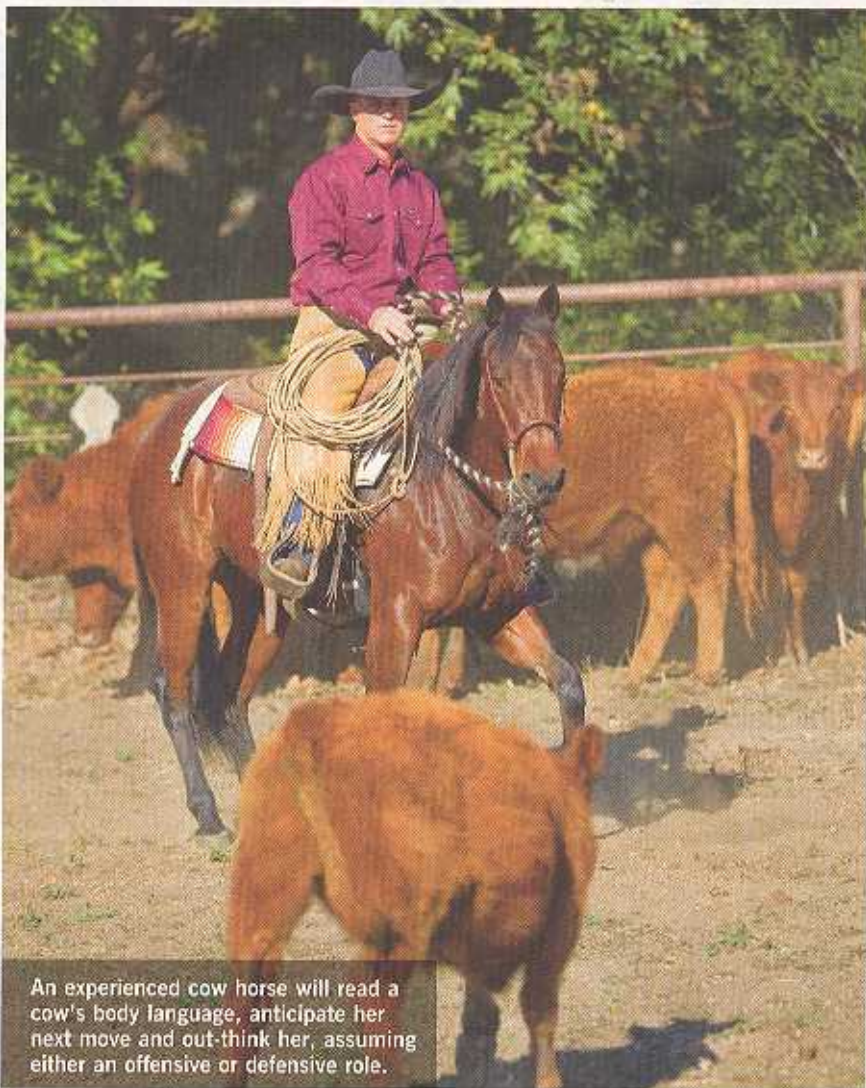
is when your horse is moving forward, toward the cow, and defense is when he's moving backward, or away from the cow. (For more information, see "Cow Control," February 2008 *Western Horseman*). As confusing as it might sound, the difference between a defensive and offensive turn is as simple as black and white to the horse. All you must know is if you're going backward or forward.

The problem some riders often have when they're concentrating too much on what the cow is doing is that they think because a cow is going forward, a rider also needs to go forward to stay with her. Watching as other people work their horses on cattle might be an easier way to understand what I'm explaining. If their horses step their hind feet forward as they turn, they'll go forward, which is an offensive turn. Their hindquarters will push them forward. If the horses rock back, moving their hind feet underneath them farther, they'll pull with their hindquarters. This is a defensive turn, because the horses are trying to retreat and stay out of a cow's flight zone.

Because you won't see what your own horse does with his hind feet as you work a cow, you need to learn how to feel what he's doing. Seeing the movement of another rider's horse and realizing the effect they're having on a cow can help you identify from the cow's movement how the horse's hindquarters are causing the cow to respond in a particular manner.

Taking things a step further, your horse can pivot on his inside or outside hind foot while turning with a cow, and he'll learn which foot is the most appropriate for the situation. Your horse's pivot foot is the one that bears the most weight for the longest period in a turnaround. Most horses will turn faster when they pivot on the inside foot because it's creating forward motion. When a horse pivots on his outside foot, it's a backing motion. The horse won't be as fast, but that's okay, because he'll be moving out of the cow's flight zone and giving ground.

I don't train my horses to use a particular pivot foot when working a cow. Instead, I just teach them to read the cow and stay in position. The cow will teach the horse which foot to use and when. A horse can



An experienced cow horse will read a cow's body language, anticipate her next move and out-think her, assuming either an offensive or defensive role.

decide better and more quickly than if you're interfering with his concentration. I trust a horse to know more about how to be a horse than I do. My job is to teach him his job, motivate him to do it, then get out of his way and let him figure out how to do it efficiently.

Defense in the Rodear

You see horses initiating defensive plays most frequently in cutting, and while working cattle in the rodear. In the rodear, your goal is to keep the cattle as quiet as possible, especially if you're working pairs. If you draw too much attention, the pair you're working will panic and separate, and the other cattle around you will get excited and you may separate the other pairs. This is a situation in which being slow, effective and efficient is better than being fast and creating chaos.

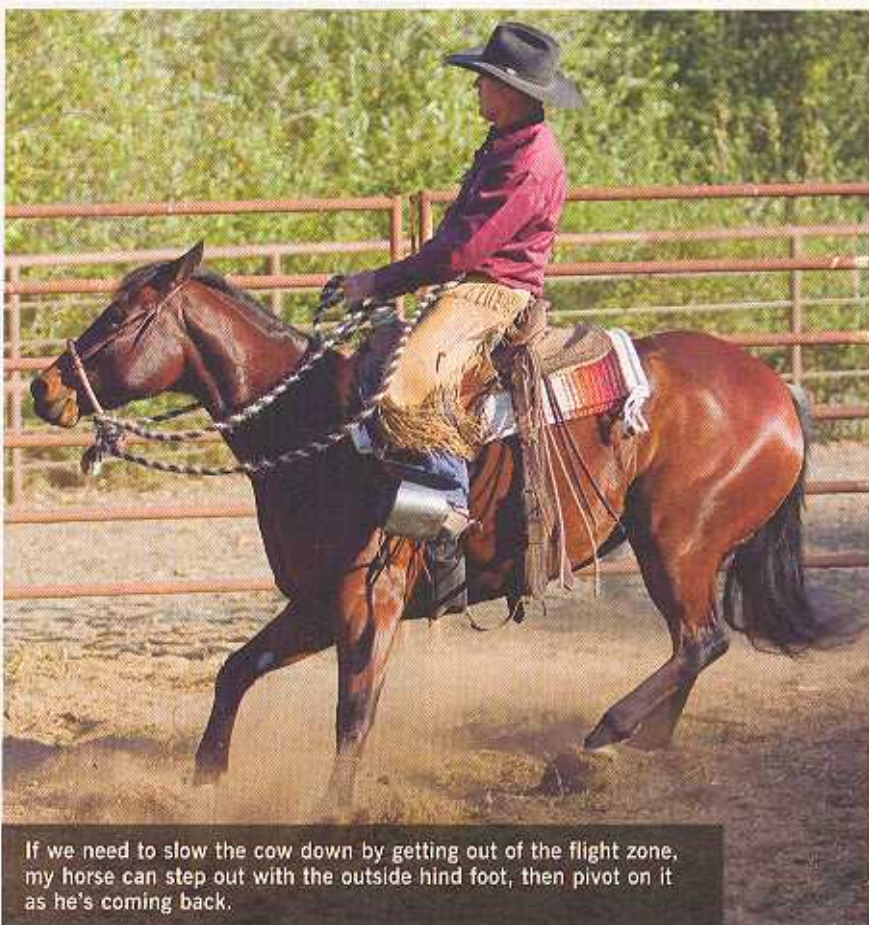
A cow isn't a highly intelligent animal, but it's interesting to see how many experienced horsemen have difficulty out-thinking one. When you run out of knowledge and resort to using force and strength, you intimidate the cow, which causes her to use survival instincts to run and seek the herd's protection.

If you read the cow's flight zone, however, her speed will tell you when to back off. As long as you can maintain position on the cow's balance point, you can control her direction. The tricky thing with pairs is that the balance point and flight zone, as well as the herd instinct to seek each other or return to the herd, might be different for each animal. Not only will a good cow horse learn to read and control a single cow, but an experienced horse will learn to keep the two together while separating them from the herd.

A horse can work several tough cattle slowly if he learns to get out of the flight zone, even if it means retreating deep into the herd, to maintain position on the cow's balance point. If things get out of control, it's because you're too deep into the flight zone and too far away from the balance point. As we've discussed in previous articles, flight zone determines speed, and balance point determines direction. (For more on working cattle in this manner, see "Training Inside the Triangle," February 2007 *Western Horseman*, or order Black's



If my horse is in the correct position on the balance point, he can stay in the flight zone and turn with speed, pivoting on his inside hind foot.



If we need to slow the cow down by getting out of the flight zone, my horse can step out with the outside hind foot, then pivot on it as he's coming back.

DVD *Working Cattle in the 'A' Pen, An Introduction* at martinblack.net.)

A horse can learn very quickly how to slow a cow by getting away from her and stopping her on her balance point. Waiting even a few seconds will give your horse time to settle and learn to get into position so he can relax. At the same time, it'll give the cow time to realize that it might be easier to yield to the horse and seek relief somewhere else.

It's critical to let your horse proceed with caution. Too much speed going into

a cow's flight zone can cause the cow to resist, and your horse might get out of position. Working slow and steady over the long term will allow you to work more cattle on less horses, and, in my opinion, both the horses and cattle will work better next time.

Going Against the Grain

Many of us heard growing up never to turn a horse's tail toward a cow when she changes direction. However, as I gained experience working cattle, I discovered that

in some situations the best or only way to keep your horse in position on the cow is to turn his tail toward her.

First, you need to consider the reason you're turning your horse toward the cow or away from her. Obviously, if you're teaching a young horse how to watch a cow, you don't want to encourage him to look away from her. But, if you're trying to maintain position on a cow and, if turning tail enables you to work faster and more efficiently, then do it.

When a cow is coming at you with a lot of determination and confidence, and your horse is at an angle from which you have to stop and turn three-quarters of a turn,

Martin Black



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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.



Here, my horse, Keeper, anticipates the cow's movement and is ready to stay on the cow's balance point.



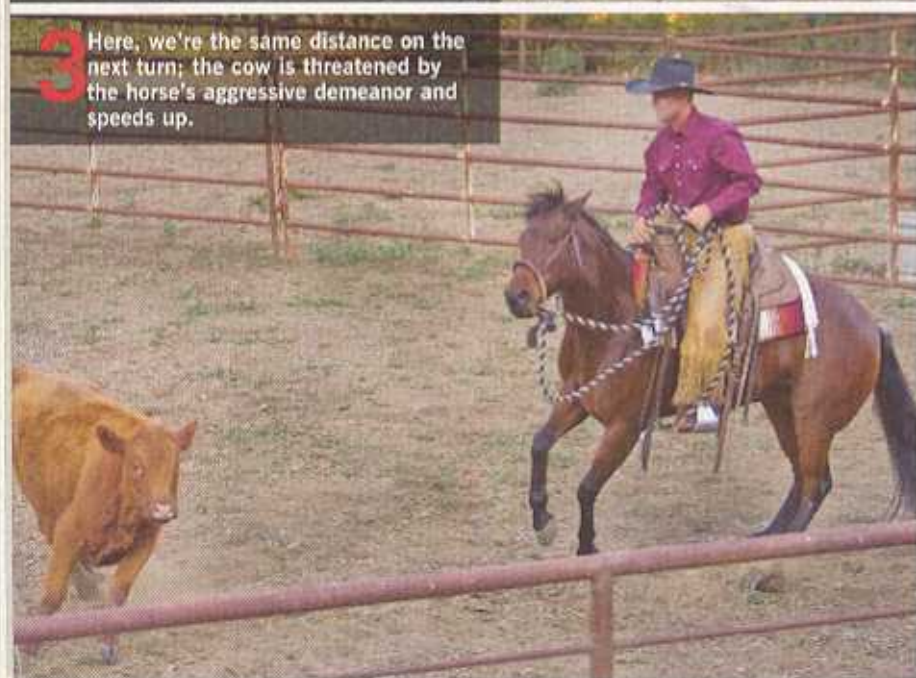
Keeper backs out of the cow's flight zone to slow her down.



1 If I want my horse to maintain position on the balance point without penetrating the flight zone, I can turn him to the left, with his tail turning toward the cow, as she turns in that direction.



2 As my horse completes turning tail, note that we've maintained a good position and regulated the cow's speed. Also note that both the cow and horse are calm.



3 Here, we're the same distance on the next turn; the cow is threatened by the horse's aggressive demeanor and speeds up.

while the cow has to turn only one-quarter of a turn to maintain her speed, it's very difficult for you to stay in position to prevent her from continuing on her path.

What could happen is that you get too close before she changes direction, and she can speed up while you stop and turn. Before you can catch up with her and get back into position, she acknowledges the relief as she gains distance from you. As you approach her again, she'll look for you to get into position so she can get relief again. She's being trained to get away from you. If your horse has more endurance than the cow, and she doesn't run through a fence, you might eventually get her stopped when she's exhausted.

Even if you get turned around fairly close to her, you're behind the balance point and in the flight zone, which means you're speeding her up in the wrong direction. Chances are you're hurrying your horse too much and distracting any thought he may have of the cow. If your horse isn't focused on the cow, you're just practicing dry work.

In that case, when the cow commits to the turn, simply turn away from her to get back on her balance point. You'll leave her flight zone and take pressure off her so she doesn't speed up. Because you're staying in sync with her, you can regulate a more consistent amount of pressure on her, and she won't get away from you. In the meantime, you might have an opportunity to stop and roll back away from the cow, doing dry work without speeding her up.

Another example of when it would be beneficial to turn your horse's tail toward the cow is when your horse is handicapped by slick ground or rough terrain, and turning toward the cow would get him out of position.

When your horse becomes handy enough, and the cow slows down and softens up enough, you can start showing your horse the cow by turning toward her. But, in my opinion, the tail-turning principle can be more productive, allowing you to get a job done working cattle while giving your horse a quiet learning experience. 🐾

Jennifer Denison is a Western Horseman senior editor. For Martin Black's tutorial on gathering your rope and rebuilding a loop, visit westernhorseman.com. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.