

Tillers' TechGuide

Training Young Steers

by Marcia Keith

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Training Oxen

Training a team of oxen can be one of the most rewarding experiences in your life. Oxen are generally good-natured, quick to learn, and eager to please. Once an ox learns to trust you, training becomes a matter of consistency, practice, and patience.

Training young steers is also a creative and challenging process with many variables. The character of young steers will vary as a function of their age, breed, and general disposition. The concepts which follow should be applied judiciously and creatively according to the needs of different trainers and animals. Patience is a must at all times, and trainers must be aware of their expectations and be prepared to change or abandon them.

Between the ages of 2 to 6 months, calves accept and trust you quickly. They should be weaned before training begins, or their attachment to their mother will likely out-compete your rewards and claims to their attention. When the animals are young the trainer's size is enough to influence the calves without harshness. While training is easier when begun at an early age, it requires commitment and planning since the team will not be able to do serious fieldwork such as plowing until they reach 3 or 4 years of age.

Before we begin let me define a few terms used in the text. **Positive reinforcement** is any type of action that gives the animal pleasure, such as scratching behind the horns, hand feeding salt/grain, or a rest break. **Negative reinforcement** is anything that gives the animal discomfort, such as striking with a stick or lash, jerking a nose ring, or using the point of a goad. Excessive use of negative reinforcement causes the animals to associate the driver with pain so that the individual's presence actually becomes a form of punishment. The team begins to shy away from the driver so that more punishment is required to control them, and the problem is compounded. Use of positive reinforcement, on the other hand, makes the driver's being near a reward. The animals are much more willing and responsive because they associate work with rewards, responding with willingness to the positive rather than from fear of the negative.

Halter Breaking

Once you have selected the animals for your team, pen them away from other animals. Keep them together so they depend on each other for comfort. Animals handled this way will become bonded and will usually stay together in the field or at the feeder. Give each animal a simple one-syllable name. The names must be different enough that the animals can respond to them individually. Names too similar such as Star and Bar will confuse the animals. Traditional names in the US include Bright and Star, or Babe and Blue. As you can see, the vowel sounds differ markedly.

Some time must be taken to familiarize the new team to their names and to your presence. They must feel comfortable with you and trust you. Spend a few minutes a day brushing them or feeding them by hand and using their names often. This will teach them to respond to their names and help to demonstrate that you do not intend to hurt them; in

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fact, being around you feels good. When the animals no longer show fear when you approach, it's time to start halter breaking.

The first step of halter breaking is teaching the animal respect for the rope. With very young animals this can be accomplished easily. With an older animal weighing much more than you do, it can become a contest of wills! Start by fitting the halter snugly. Then, using a soft rope, tie the animal in its stall or to a sturdy post or tree. Leave no more than a foot of slack in the line to prevent entanglement, and always tie your animals with a safety knot. Remember to have a sharp knife handy in case the knot must be cut in an emergency. Brush and handle the animal as you normally would until he is standing without fighting the rope. When tying becomes familiar, leading can begin.

Leading can be accomplished by one person if dealing with small calves. For animals more than a few months old, it is best to have a helper or two at first. Animals should not be allowed to overpower you at this early stage; they won't forget it in the future. After haltering, tying, and brushing the calf as usual, untie the rope and stand near his shoulder. Gently urge him forward using the command word you will use later for driving. We use the word "come." Repeating "come," pull forward firmly (a helper can push from behind) until the animal moves a few steps forward. Stop and positively reinforce this correct action. Practice for fifteen or twenty minutes at a time until the animal responds promptly, with no urging from behind. Lessons should be repeated daily with plenty of positive reinforcement for correct behavior. For larger steers a trained ox may be used to help restrain the new animal. Tie the trainee's halter to the older animal's halter. With one person leading the ox, and another with a rope to the steer's halter, give the command to move forward or "come," The older ox will pull the steer along until he realizes resistance is futile. Having the older animal along will also give the young one more confidence.

When the animal has learned "come," "whoa" should be introduced. In most cases saying the word "whoa" as the animal naturally comes to a stop will be enough to give him the right idea at first. A restraining pull on the lead or laying the crop across the animal's nose will reinforce the word. Repeat this a few times until he associates the word with rest and reward, then ask him to "whoa" when you want to. He should get the idea quickly. Standing still seems to be the preferred state of being for most cattle. If the animal is more energetic, lead him straight into a corner or the side of a barn. Tell him "whoa" when it is certain he can't go further without running into the object. Repeat the action giving the cue to stop earlier until the animal responds before the barrier forces him to. "Whoa" is without a doubt the most important command in your animal's vocabulary, so be sure to work on this every day. Be patient but firm. An animal that cannot be trusted to stop is of little use in the field.

It is important to remember while training that every animal and every driver has an individual personality. Some animals require more convincing than others before they'll acknowledge you as boss. Never respond to an animal in anger. If the animal has run your patience past the limit, have the animal perform a simple command correctly, reward the correct behavior, then stop the session or take a break until your mood

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improves. In anger your punishment is likely to exceed the crime and the animal will respond in kind, resisting with greater force. At the same time, work on your patience. If an animal can make you lose your composure, he's in control, not you!

On the other hand, some animals respond very quickly. If a normally responsive animal suddenly refuses to obey, perhaps the cue was unclear. Don't punish an animal for not understanding. Repeat the cue to be sure the refusal is disobedience and not a question.

Pay attention to your animals' behavior so you can recognize when they are disobeying and when they just don't understand. If an animal that is normally responsive suddenly turns balky, check your equipment. Is something rubbing or pinching? Has he outgrown his bow? Does he have a bruise or sore somewhere? Is the load too heavy? Is the animal sick or lame? Maybe your work sessions are exceeding this particular animal's attention span. Knowing the patterns of his normal behavior will make it easier to decide where the problem lies.

Using The Round Pen

Once your animals are responding well enough to "whoa" and "come" to lead safely, you should proceed with training in a round pen. There are many different methods of control used by ox drivers, but in this guide we're going to concentrate on training the animals to voice commands. In countries around the world various devices such as bits, nose rings, pointed goads or lines looped around the animals' ears are used to reinforce commands. Tillers International prefers the North American tradition of using only voice commands, body language, and a "crop" or short stick. Working with lead ropes can be counter-productive to the teaching of voice commands as the animals and trainer may learn to depend on them. The training ring permits control without ropes (Paramananda dasa). Starting an animal's training without the benefit of ropes or other forms of restraint requires a small work area without corners or objects an animal can get his nose behind. A round pen about 22' to 25' (8 meters) in diameter serves this purpose very well.

To construct the training ring, 23 feet in diameter, we used four 4 x 16-foot stock panels (1.20 x 5 meters), nine metal posts, a gate, and a few hours of time. (Alternative fencing materials could include sorghum or cane stalks, bamboo poles, stones, woven grass mats, etc.) Construct the ring in an area away from the barn where the calves will be unable to see the other cattle or be disturbed by on-going activities. If the ring must be constructed near the barn, the sides should be masked to prevent the animals from seeing through the ring. Position the gate away from the barn as well, hanging it so that it opens into the ring to discourage escape attempts. It's also important that the animals not be able to put their heads through the sides or injure their eyes on protrusions. The small size of the pen allows teaching of voice commands without use of ropes, nose rings, bits, or any other device. The calves cannot escape your reach or avoid cues by putting their heads in a corner or through the fence. Without the option of escape, they respond quickly to the crop and voice commands.

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The first step of training in a ring is to familiarize the calves to the new work area. The calves should be turned loose together in the pen the first day to graze undisturbed. The second time out, training can begin. The animals generally work in a counter clockwise direction so the fence is on their right side and the driver toward the center, as oxen are traditionally driven from the left. Unlike when training with lead ropes, a second person standing behind the animals trying to encourage forward movement is neither needed nor desired. The animals quickly learn to respond to the voice and crop cues and will be stopping and starting on a command in a very few minutes.

The cues we use are simple and straightforward. The first command is "come" accompanied by a tap of the crop on the hip to signal forward movement. The second command is "whoa" accompanied by a gentle tap on the nose with the crop. Within a few days the animals will respond to the word commands with only occasional reinforcement from the stick. It is important to take frequent breaks during the twenty-minute work sessions for head scratching and praise. Also, the animals should be brushed and given a lot of attention before and after each session, successful or not. This helps to increase their confidence and trust.

As soon as the animals are responding to "whoa" and "come" without difficulties, the commands "haw" and "gee" can be added. Tapping the animals gently with the crop on the right side of the head with the "haw" command and on the left side with the "gee" command brings excellent results without ever using a lead rope.

Backing can be taught in the ring as well and should be included in this early stage of training. Keeping the right side of the animal close to the ring and positioning yourself at the left shoulder, tap the animal on the foreleg using the crop and the "back" command. Reward should be given for even one step the first few times. Backing is very difficult for cattle as they cannot see behind themselves and must trust you to guide them safely.

During training the animals react, at first, to avoid the crop but they soon learn to respond to the reward of brushing and encouragement. The position of the stick becomes a secondary cue, pointing toward the head for whoa or the hip for come. Another secondary cue is your body position. The normal position when moving forward is at the shoulder, though some teamsters walk in front of the animals teaching them simply to follow.

As the calves progress, introduce them progressively to the yoke. In doing so, the team will quickly and painlessly accept the yoke as a normal part of their daily routine. Initially, the yoke bows can be draped over the back of the animals' necks during brushing, leading and training in the round pen. The yoke beam can be placed on the team during daily brushing sessions, handling them as usual, then removing the beam before working them or turning them out. When the calves are responding well to all the commands, the team can be worked in the yoke, first in the training ring, then on the road (but with safety lead ropes). A larger training ring, about 16 meters in diameter, is ideal for this.

If you should have a team with mixed temperaments, put the stronger willed animal on the near (left) side where he can easily be corrected for misbehavior without disturbing the more sensitive animal. When one animal is faster than the other, put the

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faster animal on the outside, as it is easier to speed up the slower animal than to slow down a fast one. Once you have determined your team's working positions, always tie them, feed them, and lead them in their respective positions.

Signaling a team to make a haw (left) or gee (right) turn will take slightly different cues than they learned working singly in the ring. For a haw turn the left or "near" animal must move more slowly than the right or "off" animal. To accomplish this, use the crop in a diagonal pattern, alternatively putting it in front of the near animal then tapping the off animal on the hip until the turn is completed. For a gee turn the cues are reversed. Keeping your position by the near animal's head, put the crop in front of the off animal then tap the near animal on the hip, repeating the motion until the turn is completed. Once the team is comfortable being driven in the yoke, the safety lead ropes should be abandoned. They can pull a small log without restraint, responding to only voice commands and the stick.

Use of the round pen makes training a young team to voice commands amazingly fast and easy. The animals cannot escape and quickly learn to obey voice commands. The pen takes little room and very materials. It can be built in a few hours and pays for itself with quick results working the calves just 20 minutes per day. The end product is a responsive, willing team with which working is a pleasure.

Teaching Steers To Pull

Once your team is accustomed to being driven in the yoke, it's time to begin the process of teaching them to pull. The first thing you will need to do is get them used to the noise of something behind them. We start with a chain, hooking it to the ring with a lot of noise a rattling. Let it brush against their legs, back and shoulders. Rattle the rings and shake the yoke as you fasten it on. Encourage them with your voice when they seem nervous.

Leave the chain dragging along the ground and ask them to move forward. They may jump a bit when the chain starts rattling on gravel so be ready. After a few feet, stop and reassure them and then go on with a normal practice session, stopping to relax them whenever they seem upset. After a day or two, fasten a branch or small log to the chain, making sure at first to make wide turns until the animals learn to avoid the chain. Larger logs or a stone boat with a gradual increase in weight will start to condition them to hard work. Don't put the team to a heavy load too soon. If you find they can't move it on the first try, lighten the burden or they will become discouraged and learn to bump the load (back into it). In training with a log or stone boat you can load it with about half the team's combined body weight. Alternatively, if you have a means of determining draft force, a mature animal (4 years or older) can exert no more than 8 percent and should be worked up to that gradually. This force is usually measured as tension in the traction chain. (See Tillers Dynamometer TechGuide.)

It is a good idea to get them used to a lot of different sights and sounds at the beginning of training. If they will be working near traffic or tractors, get them used to the noise and movements early. Take them out to the fields to follow behind a working team.

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To teach them to plow, pull a log along a furrow with the off steer behind a plow team.

Once the team becomes comfortable pulling the logs or stone boat with a chain, introduce them to a tongued vehicle or implement. If the pair is small, use something light or wait until they're larger. A light forecart or cultivator makes a good start. This requires teaching the secondary commands "step over," "head up," "whoa haw," "back haw," "whoa gee," and "back gee." Drive the animals up to the implement. Let them sniff it, lick it, and look it over. Walk them around it once, then bring them up perpendicular to the tongue. Urge the off animal forward using the command "step over" to signal him over the tongue. The near animal must be instructed to remain stationary while his partner "steps over" the tongue. Practice this maneuver several times until you're sure the animal understands. It is a good idea to have them in an enclosed area the first time you use a tongued implement. When they are comfortable around the implement, drive them up as before and instruct the off animal to step over then stop. Lift the tongue to the ring instructing the animals to back (you may require an assistant the first few times), then place the pin or fasten the chain securely. As before, move the animals forward a few steps and stop. Praise them and calm them, then continue the session as usual. Make frequent stops, or the animals may run when they see the implement "chasing" them. Turns should be wide at first until the animals are used to pushing against the tongue.

For a tight left turn while pulling with a chain or a pole, use "whoa" or "back haw." In this maneuver the near animal stops or backs while the off animal moves around him. "Whoa" or "back gee" means the off animal must stop or back while the near one goes around. With a tongue, the animal on the inside of the turn must side-step some to allow the turn. The importance of the animals' knowing their names becomes crucial at this stage. The last of the secondary commands is "head-up." This serves two purposes. First, it keeps the animal from eating whatever crop he's working in. The second is to ease backing (especially with polled cattle). When asked to back, the animals' natural inclination is to lower their heads. This allows the yoke to slide forward until it rests against the horns, pinching the ears or striking the poll of dehorned animals. Teaching them to raise their heads puts the pressure pack down on the neck, spreading the force of the load over a larger area. This also holds true for brakeless carts on a downhill slope. When asked to back on the cart, tap them under the chin saying "head-up." After a little practice, the animals will learn that keeping their heads up when backing eases the load and will do it naturally. Do the same when the animals try to graze in the yoke.

There are many other commands you can teach your team, and your situation may require some unique ones not covered here. Whatever your situation may be, the keys to teaching any cues remain the same: consistency, practice, and patience. The more time you spend working with your team, the more responsive they will become, and a team responding willingly and obediently to your commands trained with your own hands is an experience you'll find hard to match!