

## PENNING AND WORKING CATTLE

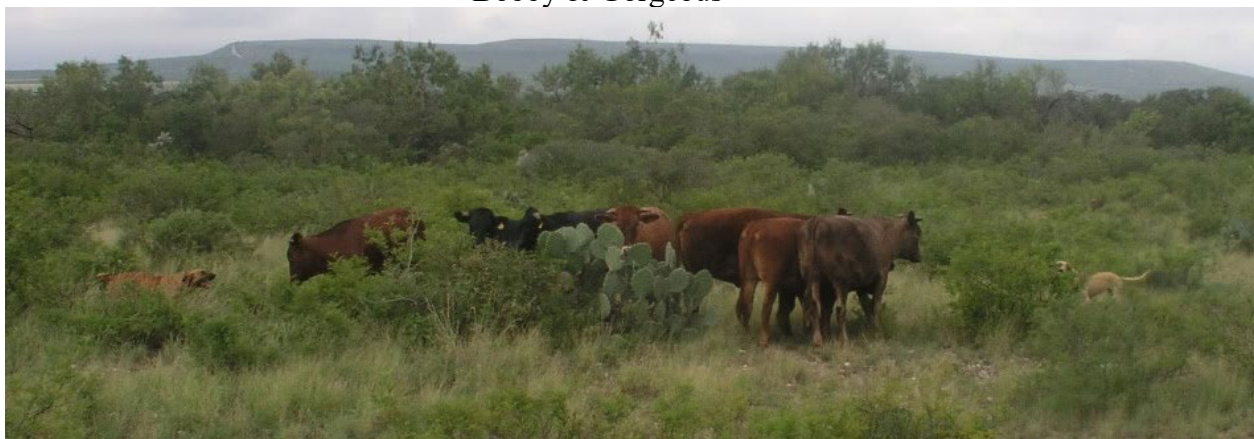
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Bobby & Gorgeous



## PENNING CATTLE

In today's cattle business, management of beef herds to ensure the ability to take advantage of all appropriate profit enhancing technology depends on being able to pen all of one's cattle at will. Several methods of accomplishing this task of penning are available. These include 1) using feed to entice cattle into a pen; 2) driving cattle into the pen afoot or using horses, four-wheelers, pickups, helicopters or some combination; 3) trapping cattle at water or feed troughs with spring-loaded or one-way gates; 4) use of cattle dogs in one or more scenarios; or 5) some other approach not included above. Each method has advantages and disadvantages for the different classes or types of cattle, the various regions and pasture types and sizes, the seasons of the year, owners' and managers' preferences and other pertinent considerations including effectiveness, cost, availability and impact on cattle performance. Availability of knowledgeable hands, whether on the payroll or as day hands, is also important.

Impact on cattle performance is a very important consideration. An appropriate goal in penning cattle is to accomplish the task with minimal stress on the cattle (and the owner) along with minimal cost. Each penning method has its pros and cons and is used by various cattle managers with appreciable levels of success in meeting the goal of low stress and low cost. Discussion of each method follows. Of course, once cattle are penned they should continue to be worked in a fashion to minimize stress.

***Training Cattle.*** Cattle can be handled during daily activities to become accustomed to behaving in a desired fashion. For example, if a manager moves cattle from one pasture to another (with more grass), and does it in a similar manner every time, cattle will learn to change pastures easily. If in the course of changing pastures cattle can be taken through the working facility, then it is relatively easy to pen them by closing the appropriate gates. Further, cattle that are taught to follow a feed truck and are rewarded with a little feed, can be led into or through pens in that way. Cattle that are properly introduced to being worked with dogs (that work in the proper fashion) will learn to settle calmly and remain in the herd which can then be moved. In all these cases the training is through enticement and reward or applying and relieving pressure on the cattle. The goal is to have the cattle become trained so these activities become routine.

***Penning with Feed.*** This method is used successfully by many owners/managers particularly with smaller herds. This method is generally inexpensive, does require some time and cost to familiarize cattle with cubes or other feed, and works well with herds that don't fear humans. The primary concern is that often one or more cows, especially in seasons of good forage availability, may not come into the pen.

***Driving to Pen.*** Penning cattle afoot or with horses, four-wheelers, pickups, helicopters or a combination is used by many operations with good success. Using a helicopter incurs significant hourly charges but in areas of large pastures and less gentle cattle may actually save both time and cost compared to other methods. Horses and four-wheelers provide good mobility to move herds into pre-pen traps and then to strongly fenced working pens. Availability of experienced personnel in a timely fashion is important. Construction of properly designed wings, traps and pens can greatly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of this approach. This approach costs more than using feed but is very effective with small and large herds.

**Trapping, Roping or Darting.** Using water traps or feed baited traps is sometimes effective, but while often good for cleaning wild cattle out of a pasture, it is not an approach that works well for application of technology in modern beef operations. Reasons include time required, variable success, distance from an effective trap location to a good working pen and other considerations. Roping or darting cattle with tranquilizers to capture or treat them is also used with success on individual cattle but is not usually practical for large numbers. The safety of workers and cattle is also a concern.

**Cattle Dogs.** The use of dogs for penning cattle in conjunction with one of the methods listed above may enhance the effectiveness of the method and /or may reduce the number of workers needed for penning a herd of a given size. For example, trained dogs may be used with the feed to encourage stragglers or runoffs to join the herd in the pen. Or cowdogs may be used to find cattle and/or to help keep together a herd being driven to the pen so as to reduce the number of riders needed. Costs and availability of personnel and dogs are a concern, as well as time to accustom cattle to being handled with dogs.

**Benefits of Low Stress Cattle Penning.** Consider an example comparing cattle penned easily at a walk to cattle penned with difficulty. A group of 100 seven-hundred-pound steers are to be penned, loaded on a truck to be weighed and sold using that weight to determine payment. If the cattle have been handled and trained so that penning is a routine task accomplished by walking the cattle into the pen in less than an hour, the cattle have been stressed minimally and weight shrink will be 2% or less. If the cattle have not been made accustomed to being penned routinely, the job could take significant time with the cattle running some and being stressed significantly. This could result in weight loss (shrinkage) of 7% or more, depending on the situation. The difference in shrinkage between the two groups is 5 percentage points, which is 35 pounds per steer or 3,500 pounds for the herd. At today's prices these steers would likely bring \$2 or more per pound. Two dollars times 3,500 pounds is \$7,000. Low stress cattle penning reaps benefits.

**Summary.** Several methods of penning cattle are available with many variations to fit various situations. Minimizing stress on the cattle and cost are key considerations. Calculating the value of timely, low-stress penning may not always be easy. However, the value of penning a herd of cattle in the first attempt at a walk to be worked calmly and with minimal stress should be clear to cattle owners. Good management yields gentle, well-behaved cattle.



# Cattle Pen Design and Use

As one contemplates applying modern technology to a beef herd and makes plans on how to pen and work the cattle, a few considerations on pen design, construction and use are warranted. This activity, like many others, is subject to a wide variety of approaches, decisions and variations in final implementation.

***Pen Design and Construction.*** The design of pen facilities for beef cattle varies across locations and reflects differences in many factors, including region, tradition, terrain, herd size, cattle type, managemental requirements, cost, frequency of use, available materials and personal preference of managers. There are some general considerations that may be applied universally to the design of cattle pens and working facilities, including the following:

- 1) Maximize handler and cattle safety and comfort.
- 2) Locate gates properly to promote ease of cattle movement and convenience of operation. More gates are usually preferable to fewer gates, except for cost.
- 3) Build the working facility to optimize or balance access for loading cattle transport vehicles with distance and ease of bringing cattle from pastures into pens.
- 4) Pens should be of adequate size to contain the entire herd with plenty of room to sort, separate and hold groups such as cows, calves by sex, etc. Horseback sorting and working requires larger pen areas than does sorting on foot. Nervous cattle may handle more easily and safely by horseback.
- 5) Design alleys, chute and associated gates to facilitate your cattle working plan which contains order of activities, details of treatments, etc. Set up your squeeze chute to permit some sorting when cattle are released and do not locate the squeeze chute to release cattle back into a pasture. If possible, observe a squeeze chute in use before purchasing.
- 6) Build chutes, gates, alleys, etc. to proper dimensions for the cattle to be worked; a variable width chute may be warranted to accommodate cows and calves with minimal attempts to turn back. The height and design of fences, chute/alley sides and gates are important; higher fences discourage cattle from attempting to jump out. Catwalks along working chute/alley provide convenience, safety and reduce worker fatigue. A calf table is a good investment, particularly with larger herds. Roofs over the crowding pen, working chute/alley and squeeze chute are excellent protection for workers and cattle from rain and sun. Drainage of all areas is important. Windbreaks should be considered, particularly to the north.
- 7) The design of the means of getting cattle into the work alley/chute is very important. A tub, bud box or other design to fit working preferences should be built with consideration to how it will be used. Ease and efficiency of getting cattle into the tub or bud box are also important.

- 8) Wire traps and perhaps wings may be a good investment to facilitate penning and also holding groups of cattle for extended periods. Watering facilities in traps and one or two pens permit holding cattle for a few days.
- 9) Electricity at the working facility is often a good investment for operating various equipment such as branding irons, clippers, scales, etc. Also, occasionally a need to work on cattle at night arises and electric lighting is better than a flashlight or lantern.
- 10) Commercially available plans and equipment should be considered. If the operation covers several locations, a set of portable working pens may be preferable to building working facilities on each place, particularly leased properties.

These are not the only important points. As in many endeavors, common sense and attention to detail will help to accomplish goals.

***Using the Pens.*** As discussed elsewhere, there are a number of alternative methods one may use to get the cattle into the pen. The most important consideration is to pen all the cattle with minimum stress. This attention to low stress handling should continue throughout the working session and release back into the pasture. A few suggestions to help in this endeavor are listed below:

- 1) Do not release cattle from the pens through the same gate used to bring them into the pens. If practical, locate pens so that when moving cattle to a different pasture they travel through the pen area. If this is done, moving into the pen area becomes routine to the cattle and penning them for working becomes a matter of closing the right gates.
- 2) Move cattle through the pens, sorting, working through the chute and applying treatments at a moderate pace with as little noise as practicable.
- 3) Before releasing cattle from pens and/or traps, allow cattle to settle down, pair with their calves and otherwise calm down before opening a gate and allowing them to leave.
- 4) In the course of handling your herd when not penning to work the cattle, it may be possible to allow them to enter then leave the pen at a slow pace without any harassment; this may facilitate penning on the day you wish to work them.
- 5) Study cattle behavior and their reactions to various actions on your part. Anticipating reaction of cattle is key to effective, low-stress handling.

Some stress on cattle is unavoidable. However, if one emphasizes low stress handling, the goal can be achieved.

# Cattle Working with Dogs

Using dogs for working cattle may save costs through labor reduction. Several cattle handling tasks may be accomplished using dogs; the requirement for human help is usually reduced.

**Example Situations.** These descriptions represent actual cases in which dogs are being used to handle cattle in Texas and elsewhere.

*Example 1:* Dogs are used in large, brushy pastures to locate cattle by scent, bunch them by circling and barking, and hold up the herd by baying in front. Riders can then drive and pen the herd while it is being held together by the dogs.

*Example 2:* Dogs are used in growing yards and feedlots to move cattle from pens and through alleys or to push and hold cattle up to feed bunks and other tasks.

*Example 3:* Dogs are used in some regions with riders to cover large areas (with fewer riders) and push cattle to a central gathering point.

*Example 4:* Dogs are used daily to assist in routine ranch work, with or without a horse, to move cattle, to assist in the working pens and many other tasks.

Other examples exist, but these are sufficient to illustrate the diverse uses of dogs in cattle operations.

**Breeds of Stockdog.** The tasks described above are not accomplished with a single breed of dog. Example 1 would most often employ dogs of the "cur" type, such as Blackmouth Cur, Catahoula or Blue Lacy. Example 2 might require Border Collies or Kelpies or perhaps Australian Shepherds (Aussies). Examples 3 and 4 could be accomplished with the Australian Cattle dog (Blue Heeler), Australian Shepherd, Border Collie, Kelpie or crosses of these breeds. These are the most commonly used breeds of stockdog; others include English Shepherd, Welsh Corgi, McNab Shepherd, New Zealand Sheepdog and Australian Working Collie. Newer breeds include Hangin' Tree Cowdog and Cattlemaster Cattle dog.



Border Collie - Ring



Blackmouth Cur - Lou

Puppies of a stockdog breed are expected to show interest in livestock and to exhibit a style or pattern of work characteristic of the breed. Inherited work patterns include manner of

approaching cattle, amount of barking, tendency to go ahead of or behind stock, and other behavioral traits. One should consider tasks to be done and type of cattle to be handled and choose a breed accordingly, then select within the breed for those individuals which possess the desired traits.

***Acquiring a Stockdog.*** For applications like examples 1 or 3, a rancher may wish to contract with individuals using dogs for this purpose, particularly if cattle penning is done only 2 or 3 times a year. Frequency of use in examples 2 and 4 implies daily need for dogs. One should determine application and breed desired and whether to begin with a puppy, or a started or trained dog. Immediacy of need; manner of use in the operation; dog training and handling abilities; cost; availability; and other factors impact this decision.

Before purchasing a puppy, one should observe the parents working to ascertain that their style, etc. would be satisfactory for the anticipated tasks. Puppies from excellent working parents may fail to perform; starting with a puppy from non-working parents is an unnecessary risk. Many times, an inexperienced person can save time and increase chances of success by purchasing a trained or well-started dog (or dogs) from a reputable breeder/trainer and engage the seller to assist implementing their use in the operation.

Costs of dogs vary; however, one should be able to purchase a good puppy for \$200-\$500. Prices of started and trained dogs are based on quality of the dog and amount of time and training required to reach that stage. Recent prices for finished dogs have ranged from \$1000 to \$3,500 with some higher.

***Knowledge/Skills Required.*** Anyone wishing to utilize dogs should acquire some knowledge and ability in certain critical areas. These areas include 1) cattle behavior and reactions to challenges; 2) dog behavior and handling; 3) determination and patience to achieve success in spite of less-than-perfect early outcomes; and 4) ability to follow instructions and learn from advice of knowledgeable dog trainers and handlers.

Study and practice are necessary to achieve proficiency. The ability to consider a cattle handling situation, to anticipate potential problems and to prevent or circumvent the problems is the mark of success. The goal should always be kept in mind: to accomplish the desired cattle handling task with minimum stress on the cattle.

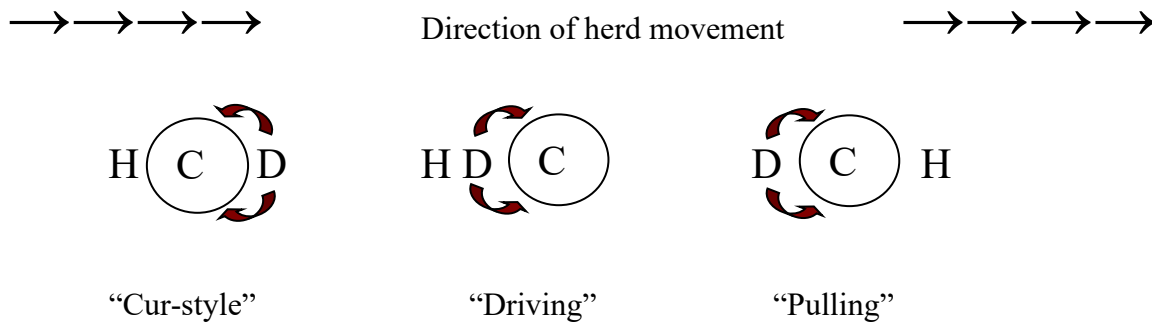
***Commands.*** Verbal commands or whistle signals are useful in directing dogs to handle cattle. The purpose is to facilitate positioning a dog around a herd, and usually the fewer commands the better.

Commands of obvious utility include "Come", "No", "Hush" and "Load up". Some commands are based on the style of work such as the flanking commands "Go bye" and "Away to me" which direct Border Collies and Kelpies to move around the herd clockwise and counterclockwise, respectively; "Down", "Walk up" and "Easy" are also linked to Border Collie workstyle. Cur handlers might tell dogs to "Get ahead" of cattle, come "In behind" the horse/handler, or "Lead out" to reduce pressure at the front of the herd.

Degree of control of stockdogs varies with handlers; some handlers exercise a high degree of control while others are successful with less control and fewer commands. Importance of commands and control depends on breed and type of dog, specific cattle handling tasks to be accomplished, and handler's preference and objectives.

Regarding control, the essential areas are the ability to 1) keep a dog with you until you are ready to begin, 2) send a dog to stock, 3) place and keep a dog in the proper position, 4) vary the amount of pressure a dog puts on stock and 5) stop a dog and call it back to the handler.

**Methods of Moving Cattle.** Three basic methods of moving cattle with dogs (working styles) may be described with respect to direction of movement and relative positions of cattle (C), handler (H) and dog (D). "Cur-style" is characterized by dogs ahead of the herd holding the cattle together and the handler(s), usually horseback, driving the herd from behind. "Driving" involves the movement of cattle by the dog from behind while the handler is behind both dog and cattle; the handler may be afoot, horseback or in a vehicle. "Pulling" is the dog's causing the herd to follow the handler, who may be afoot, horseback or in a vehicle and may or may not use feed to entice the gentler cattle.



Curved arrows indicate area generally traversed by dog. Circle represents herd.

Variations of these exist, dogs may be trained to move stock using more than one method and each method may employ one or more dogs simultaneously.

**Conclusion.** Successful use of dogs for working cattle depends on understanding the tasks to be accomplished, applying certain fundamental principles of animal behavior and training, and persistence to move closer to the ideal visualized. The use of dogs for working cattle may not be desirable or feasible in all operations; however, this practice offers cost savings and enhanced effectiveness in many situations.

# Cur Style

**Introduction.** Many readers are familiar with the terms outrun, fetch, gather, pull, drive, flank, etc. and have definitions and applications in mind when considering these terms in conjunction with handling livestock with dogs. These terms and the indicated actions are related to the manner in which Border Collies, Kelpies, Australian Shepherds, Australian Cattle Dogs and similar type dogs are trained and handled by a large number of knowledgeable individuals. Recognizing that not all these terms/actions are used with all dogs of all these breeds, subsets of these actions are used by most trainers of dogs of these types. Furthermore, most of these actions are based on the natural styles of the dogs of the breeds indicated so as to enhance the utility of the dogs in stock working situations.

There exist a large number of individuals who take a somewhat different approach to handling cattle with dogs; however, that approach is also based on the natural working behavioral traits of the dogs employed. Many, but not all, of these people work dogs of the “cur” breeds or types. The most commonly cited cur breeds are Catahoula, Blackmouth Cur and Florida Cur; some include the Lacy as a cur breed. Many handlers use dogs which are crosses among these breeds or with other breeds. The approach that these cattle workers/dog handlers employ is encompassed by the term “cur style”; it is my intention to provide here my understanding of several aspects of this approach to handling cattle with dogs.

**Origin.** I am not certain of the origin of the cur style. However, I have many times observed its use by stockmen in the southern United States to handle/drive cattle and hogs. Several of these stockmen have indicated that it is the way that their families have handled livestock for years. Regardless of origin, proper successful application of this cattle handling technique requires knowledge and understanding by the handler of several key components.

**Dog Characteristics.** When discussing animals and their behavior one must deal with a continuum rather than absolutes; with this in mind, I will describe traits sought in curs. The primary trait on which the cur style of work is based requires the use of a heading dog, which is necessary to successfully apply/utilize this method. That is, the dog should have a natural urge to go to the front of moving cattle. Most handlers when evaluating a Border Collie or Kelpie puppy want to see this desire to head stock; handlers evaluating a cur pup want to see a similar reaction to livestock.

Barking at, or baying, cattle is a characteristic of the cur breeds and is a component of the cur style. Non-barking dogs can be worked cur style; however, while the sound often irritates handlers of some other breeds, there are some utilitarian aspects of barking. Locating dogs and cattle in brush or timber is one of these. Qualities of the bark are often of concern; a bark which can be heard at appreciable distance is desired.

The level of aggressiveness with livestock varies in the cur breeds, just as in Border Collies, Kelpies and others. Almost no discussion among cur handlers can take place without someone talking about a “lead dog”. This term refers to a dog that has a natural tendency to remain at the front balance point of a herd while applying a light or moderate amount of pressure but not “too much” pressure. Almost all successful curs are head dogs; only a portion of these are natural

lead dogs. When evaluating puppies, those that circle the motionless herd continuously are less likely to be natural lead dogs than are those which stand at a point which they choose and bark at the cattle. This variation is analogous to the behavior of strong- versus loose-eyed Border Collie pups and their initial reactions to stock.

Herd sense may be defined as a dog's awareness of the group of cattle and natural inclination to apply sufficient pressure to immobilize the herd but not so much as to disperse the herd.

Aggressiveness toward livestock varies in curs so that some dogs put very little pressure on an animal or a herd and others may attempt to bite or catch a single animal and put extreme pressure on a herd. As one might surmise, extreme aggressiveness toward livestock can make a dog useless for cur style work; even the very rough dogs must respect the herd, that is not attack individuals in the herd, in order to be useful. While some people use dogs to actually grip and hold wild cattle, a "catch dog" does not fit into my definition of cur style cattle work.

Biting of cattle is occasionally required to gain control by dogs. This desired bite is a brief grip on the nose, head or ear which is more like a nip or a slap so as to gain control but not to abuse the stock. Dogs with a tendency to catch and hang on are less desired than properly biting dogs and in extreme cases are unacceptable for use without a muzzle.

Hunting cattle, locating by scent, is often a component of cur style work. Dogs which locate cattle in brush, timber, rough terrain, etc. by winding, tracking and/or trailing can be very useful in some situations. Generally, the dogs will find the cattle and put pressure on them to form a herd, which the dogs then hold at bay until handlers arrive.

Athletic ability, including speed and agility, are important for a stockdog to be most effective. Curs are no exception. To recount, the traits generally sought by breeders and handlers of curs are heading, hunting, barking, proper bite, athletic ability and herd sense.

***Handling Cattle.*** In order to illustrate cur style, describing a typical working scenario may be useful. Let's consider a situation in which a herd of cattle, mostly cow-calf pairs, are in a moderate size pasture in East Texas. This herd consists of about 80 cows with 3- to 5-month-old calves at side. The pasture is about 600 acres, partially forested, with an adequate set of working pens near the county road which borders one side. The objective is to gather the cattle efficiently with minimal stress on the cattle and to put them into the pens so they can be worked.

The gather begins with the arrival, at or shortly after daylight, of two or three hands with their horses and cur dogs. Of course, the cattle probably hear the rattle of the gooseneck trailer and may go to an area of the pasture to evade capture, likely the farthest wooded corner. If this does not happen, the cattle likely will be in small groups distributed throughout the pasture. The dogs to be used here probably are owned and handled by one of the hands. At this point this person must decide how to proceed, determining the number of dogs, and which dogs, to use on this herd and whether to release the dogs at the trailer to hunt the cattle or to ride out and have the dogs stay with the mounted riders until needed to contain the cattle. This decision is influenced by the handler's personal preference, the amount of control trained on the dogs, the expected behavior of the cattle and other factors. As with most livestock handling situations, everything goes more quickly and smoothly if the cattle have been previously introduced to stockdogs and

their reaction to dogs has been properly conditioned. In fact, when dogs are to be used in cattle operations, this introduction and conditioning should be part of the overall management plan. For this particular job, two to four dogs should be sufficient, depending on whether the cattle have been worked previously with dogs.

Let's assume that the handler keeps the dogs with the riders until they reach a point in the pasture from which the dogs are sent to locate and bay up the cattle. The dogs may smell (wind) the cattle or may strike a track so that they can find the first group. When the dogs begin barking and move to the front of the first group of cattle, other nearby groups will tend to join the herd so that eventually all cattle are herded together. Many cur dogs naturally make wide circles to gather the cattle; such dogs will circle around all cattle in sight to bring them together. This may happen quickly or may require significant time; however, cows with calves tend to join, from some distance, a herd held together by barking dogs. Exceptions are spoiled cows which will separate from the herd to hide; this behavior is occasionally encountered. Also, if the cattle heard the trailer rattle and went to the farthest corner, once located, all cattle may already be in the herd.

Once the herd (or sometimes the first group) is located, it is important to provide sufficient time for the dogs to settle the cattle. The dogs will bark and circle the herd in order to accomplish this; if the herd runs, they will go to the front and stop them, perhaps biting lead animals to pressure them to halt. Any biting or gripping done in the course of proper cur work is done quickly and briefly without extended hanging on so that pressure is exerted on the cattle but they are allowed to stop and/or return to the herd. The riders will maintain sufficient distance so as not to put any pressure on the herd; in some cases, this means out of sight and smell of the herd. Once the herd is settled, i.e. not moving and individual cattle have decided to remain in the herd, it is time to move the herd. This is to be done quietly and carefully with the first pressure from riders that the cattle perceive will likely be on the side of the herd directly opposite from the desired direction of movement, so that if the cattle move sharply away from the riders, it will likely be in the appropriate direction (toward the pens). Also, the riders will exert only sufficient pressure to move the cattle at a walk; simultaneously, the handler may command the dogs to "lead out" or "get back" and perhaps crack a whip to break dogs' concentration and reinforce the command. The dogs will remain on the side of the herd opposite the riders, which would be the front. If the cattle attempt to escape, the riders will back off and let the dogs settle them; if the cattle move well but not wildly then the drive will proceed to the pens. The dogs will cover, moving and barking, the front quarter to half of the herd with medium to light pressure during the drive. If cattle attempt to leave the rear of the herd, riders stop and the handler sends the dogs to bring the cattle back, and the settling process may need repeating. Obviously the cattle are being trained/conditioned to handle in this fashion. Often, some cows will attempt to attack the dogs at the front of the herd, and as the dogs give ground, the rest of the herd follows/is driven behind the leaders and "lead dogs".

In some regions (Florida, for example) and with some handlers, the dogs are often called behind the horses to begin the drive. Then, if the herd starts to run, the dogs are sent to stop them and also to bring back animals trying to leave the herd. Furthermore, a rider may be put at the front to lead the herd. This variation will conserve the dogs' energy and has other merits such as permitting the use of extremely rough dogs. There are also valid criticisms of this practice,

including that dogs are not in the best position to slow a herd during the drive.

When the herd gets to the pens, dogs may lead the herd into the pens or they may be called to the back of the herd to hold the herd in place until the cattle escape into the pen. In most cases, after the cattle are penned, the curs are loaded and/or secured before work begins in the pens. Variations of this scenario occur, but most of the elements described are similar.

***Practical Considerations.*** If I have communicated adequately, several readers will realize that this cattle handling procedure can be successfully implemented with dogs which have received minimal training. The style requires certain natural or intrinsic dog behavior patterns, but a high degree of handler control of the dogs is not necessary to achieve an acceptable result. Also, training of dogs can be done during work applications. Both of these points tend to contribute to the economy or reduced cost of this method. Most appropriate applications of using stockdogs can reduce human labor requirements and cost; net savings are a valid concern.

***Faults.*** Just as all stockdog handlers have in mind a vision of how every step should occur in a cattle handling scenario, they also have a list of dog faults, some less acceptable than others. Cur handlers are not exceptions to this. Of course, a dog should have plenty of stay, heart, interest, desire or whatever is required for the dog to work as long as it is physically able; quitting by a dog is not acceptable. A commonly quoted fault is barking behind the herd; most handlers want a dog to be at or near the front of the herd and/or looking a cow in the face when barking. Related to this is the expectation that a cur go to the front of the leading animal in a running group before barking, working or attempting to stop the animal and herd; cutting in to work animals behind the front runner is unacceptable. Most handlers want a dog to work the cow and ignore her calf as long as it stays at her side; “calf catchers” are frowned upon. While a young dog may follow a runaway back to the herd and sometimes into the herd, the dog is expected to learn quickly to allow the animal to go back into the herd and then bay the herd. These are a few faults which come to mind; there are others.

***Training and Control.*** While training dogs for this style of work can be accomplished while working and a high degree of control may not be necessary, many handlers start young dogs in set up situations, and some handlers train their curs to respond to a variety of commands. Common commands used by cur handlers include the standard convenience commands like “Load up”, “Hush”, “In behind” and “Come”. Working commands might include the last two plus “Get ahead”, “Lead out”, and “Find ‘em”.

Like other stockdogs, even with only on-the-job training, curs become more easily controlled as they are used on a regular basis. They learn routine behaviors such as loading and unloading and following the riders, even through pastures containing cattle, as well as working commands such as to lead out and to leave the herd when called off. As in other work situations, handler preference and specific task requirements often determine degree of control utilized or required.

***Age.*** As with other types of stockdogs, cur puppies should not be placed in livestock handling situations with tasks they cannot perform or in which they may be injured or frightened. While many cur pups will bay cattle by 4-6 months of age, most handlers wait until a puppy is a year old before doing or expecting very much training or cattle work. Also, starting a young cur is

most often initiated with one or two older dogs in a pack situation. In fact, it is very common for handlers to routinely use two older dogs and a puppy or young dog in almost all work situations in order to be always developing future dog team members.

**Work Situations.** Teams of curs are used in a variety of cattle working situations to save labor and accomplish tasks not possible without stockdogs. As indicated, cur style is based on the natural behavioral traits of the dogs and the prey response of cattle when exposed to these dogs. The type of cattle to be handled and the local conditions will significantly influence the most appropriate type of dog needed with regard to roughness or aggressiveness with cattle, hunting skill and ability, as well as the other traits. Cows tend to require, and can tolerate, rougher dogs than do yearlings. Most ranches and/or regions where curs have been used for a significant time will exhibit the type of dog best suited to the local cattle and conditions, as well as the preferences of the handlers. For example, brushy pastures with wild cattle require good hunting skills of dogs, long drives require dogs with energy-conserving work styles, wild cattle may require dogs which are rough and exert much pressure on the herd, and so on. Most cur handlers have a pack of six to ten dogs with a variety of talents and employ this team or a subset for specific jobs best suited to the abilities of specific dogs. As one may expect, there are a number of correct ways to apply the cur style of cattle handling.

NOTE: Houston County Cowdogs on Youtube. Cur style cow penning.

[https://youtu.be/qTao\\_mXseMY?si=UYM00MZSQAAt2Ly](https://youtu.be/qTao_mXseMY?si=UYM00MZSQAAt2Ly)



Hope & Jake

## Pack Working Stockdogs

**Background.** Several breeds of dog are currently available for use in the handling of livestock, including Border Collie, Kelpie, Australian Cattledog, Australian Shepherd, Catahoula and Blackmouth. These breeds are characterized with respect to the fashion in which members of the breed address, approach, react to, and in general, handle livestock, constituting the breed's natural working style. Trainers and handlers of each breed of stockdog employ methods and approaches to using the dogs with stock based to a large degree on the breed's natural working style, but to some extent on the traditional manner in which originators and early proponents of the breed used the dogs. For example, Border Collie handlers employ the approaches used typically by Scottish shepherds to handle sheep; this method is based on the dog's being trained to respond to individual commands and a high degree of control by the handler. Border Collies handled this way are frequently worked singly or in a two-dog brace. In contrast, the traditional cur-style working of cattle employed by the originators and many present-day handlers of Catahoulas and Blackmouth curs utilize a pack approach with several dogs working simultaneously, and any control or direction by the handler is usually to influence behavior of the pack rather than that of individual dogs. The number of dogs employed in the pack varies with the job but may range from 3 to 6 or more working simultaneously on a herd.

**Commentary.** A few observations are in order regarding working dogs in a pack rather than singly. First, many wild canines live and hunt as a group or pack, with very well defined social order and behavioral patterns. Second, hunting dogs used by humans are sometimes used singly but just as frequently used in packs. For several reasons, including less individual dog control and increased pressure on the group of stock, pack working of stockdogs is probably best suited for handling cattle; sheep and goats would likely be overwhelmed, except perhaps large groups of bucks or rams. In the southern U. S. in years past, this approach was used to handle herds of swine. Stock handlers using breeds such as Border Collie and Kelpie are encouraged to consider using dogs of these breeds in packs to handle cattle. Less aggressive dogs can be successfully used than in working single dog; dogs can be added to increase control of tougher cattle. Less aggressive dogs get more aggressive in a pack.

**Advantages.** Working stockdogs in a pack generally requires less training time than the single dog methods commonly employed; natural style of the dogs is used to facilitate a controlled situation and much of the training is "on the job training." This approach requires less talent on the part of individual dogs because dogs can be packed with others to complement weak areas and generally strengthen livestock control. From the economic viewpoint, pack working stockdogs may be more efficient. Success is not dependent on acquiring and maintaining outstanding individual dogs; loss of a single dog does not have the severe impact possible as in single dog working cases. Also, while trained dogs can be worked in packs, dogs with less training can be used, thus reducing cost.

**Disadvantages.** Pack working of stockdogs is an option but other methods may be chosen for various reasons. Some tasks of handling cattle are most appropriately performed with 1 or 2 dogs under a high degree of control. Pack working may not be as stylish as individual, controlled dog work, which may be preferred by some. Some handlers may be uncomfortable working 3-5 dogs simultaneously, particularly if 1 or 2 of them are very aggressive with stock.

***Considerations.*** Working dogs in a pack to handle cattle requires an optimum level of natural stock working intensity and aggressiveness on the part of the dogs. Dogs can be allowed to work instinctively and take positions on the herd by orienting to the handler. This method also requires a good level of handler confidence and control to the extent that the handler must have sufficient knowledge and experience to be able to control and direct a group of dogs eager to work but not trained to respond well to commands. The handler does this by selecting a position in relation to desired herd movement and by causing dogs to adjust their positions by putting pressure on the dogs through specific actions. The handler also must be able to assess the handling need and tailor pack number and composition (style and aggressiveness) to the job.