



# What are the benefits?

Behavioral • Monetary • Gain vs. Shrink





## The effects of cutting on cattle

From the beginning there has been an ongoing debate between cutters, who rely on cattle for their sport, and cattlemen, who shy away from subjecting their cattle to the rigors of cutting. In recent years, however, the relationship between cutters and cattlemen has improved due to the beneficial responses cattlemen

are seeing in their herds, and in their pocketbooks. According to noted horsemen, cattlemen and research institutions, cutting is not detrimental to the cattle involved, and in fact, can actually be beneficial.

When you're talking about cattle, one of the most readily apparent benefits of cutting is behavioral. Cattle used for cutting are gentler, easier to handle, and more adaptable to their surroundings. Ross Jenkins, past president of Pacific Coast Cutting Horse Association and a feedlot manager in southern California, has experienced first hand the positive behavior traits that arise from cutting cattle.

"It teaches the cattle to stay within themselves and not scatter, and it gentles them," said Jenkins. "I know of some instances where people have wanted these heifers (from cutters) because those heifers are going to become cows, and it teaches them at an early age to stay with the herd. It basically teaches the cattle not to be as scared and as frightened of everything. I've seen it happen."

Cattle kept at a training facility undergo more handling on a daily basis than they would in a pasture or feedlot. They become accustomed to doing things such as walking through gates, loading on trailers and moving together as a herd. Whether you're talking about steers bound for slaughter or replacement heifers, the cattleman will find his job easier once the cattle are returned.

"They know how to get together, they know how to let a horse handle them. You can drive them, you can put them in a pen, you can handle them," explained noted cutting horse trainer and NCHA Executive Committee member Bill Riddle of Ringling, Oklahoma. "The big advantage is they learn how to get handled. It makes them three times easier to handle than cattle that have never been handled before. It's safer for everybody, including the cattle."

Another experienced cutting horse trainer believes that the work of cutting aids cattle in adapting to stressful situations. When transported to a new environment, such as a feedlot, most cattle will take a few days to adapt, possibly even going off their feed, before settling down and settling in. Trainer Gary Bellenfant has seen that problem nearly disappear with cattle he has used at his training facility in DeLeon, Texas.

"As far as our operation is concerned, cattle that leave here and go to the feedlot don't require any time to adapt and get on the feed," commented Bellenfant. "The cattle that go to the feedlot, they just go right to work. They probably gain three and a half pounds the first day. They get off the trucks and they go right to the feeders. And, they're gentle and they handle good."

Having well-behaved cattle is a benefit many cattlemen would appreciate. But the real concern about using cattle for cutting stems from the cattleman's number one goal—beef production. The bottom line is that the steers and heifers used for cutting are beef cattle and as such, pounds of gain per day is an all-important indicator of the success of a cattleman's business.

On the surface, it is easy to think that cutting, or any type of exercise, would reduce the weight of these well-fed bovines. But when compared to other equestrian sports that utilize cattle, like team penning or roping, cutting requires less exertion from a cow for a shorter period of time.

"When we take the cattle and work them, they might be in the pen for maybe 30 minutes," explained Riddle. "And each cow has her four, five, six minutes or less of exercise."

Riddle finds that instead of depleting the physical condition of cattle, cutting actually causes his cattle to gain more weight per day than their unworked counterparts.

"When I start working them, they always begin to eat more," related Riddle. "I liken that to the high school kid who is playing football. You start exercising him, he gets hungry. Invariably, when

we start working them, those cattle start eating more and doing better."

The debate about whether cutting actually increased or decreased daily gain was hot enough that livestock specialist Jim Pumphrey of the Noble Foundation in Ardmore, Oklahoma, did a study on the subject in 1985. In the first trial, a group of 35 heifers was randomly sorted into two groups, designated working and nonworking. Cattle in the working group were yarded an average of 1.23 hours per day for 15 days, and worked for a total average of 1.58 hours.

The research paper reports, "The worked cattle gained 0.74 pound per day more than the controls, 2.19 pounds to 1.45 pounds. This gain was 20% more than the average daily gain (1.82 pounds) of the two groups. The worked cattle required 4.4 pounds less feed per pound of animal gain."

Then, the two groups were switched. The worked cattle became the non-working group, and vice versa. The trial was repeated, with similar results. The worked group gained 2.35 pounds per day while the non-working group gained only 1.61 pounds per day, for an increase of 0.74 pound per day. Pounds of feed per pound of gain was again impressive, with a 5.7-pound feed advantage for the worked group.

"We've always had the argument, they just settled it," said Riddle. "They took a set of cattle and worked them and they took a set of cattle and didn't work them. They had them weighed, averaged and sorted before they ever started. They were as close to peas in a pod as you can get. And the cattle they worked just flat out gained the ones they didn't."

Pumphrey failed to reproduce those results in two additional trials during the same study, which showed similar gains in worked and unworked cattle. However, the latter results could have been the result of environmental stressors, a fact Pumphrey alludes to in his summary.

"Heat stress seemed to be a major area of influence when working cattle during high temperatures. Working cattle during cool temperatures may show a tendency toward increased animal performance... more work in this area would seem justified."

Pumphrey went on to conclude, "From visual observation it was evident the daily working and handling gentled the cattle. The cattle were easier to handle after being worked for the time periods by the horses. Once the new experience of being worked by the horses was repeated several times, it became familiar to the cattle and was not a stressful situation for the animals being used in these trials."

Even without an official study, cutting trainers have known for years that their cattle perform better than cattle that do not get worked.

"I see it here at home with my cattle," said Riddle. "They get a lot of work and they'll still gain nearly two pounds a day. You won't do much better than that anywhere in the world."

"I'll tell you one thing I've seen with cattle that have been here and I've worked a good while," added Bellenfant. "I'll bring them up to the pens and work them and when I turn them back out, the first thing they do is they'll go fill up on water, and they'll go straight to those feeders and they'll eat and eat and eat."

Pumphrey's study and the experiences





of veteran cutting horse trainers prove that with the proper care (feed, water and veterinary services,) cattle used for cutting show more gain than non-cutting cattle. There is one situation where cutting will not produce more gain, however, and that is when cattle are used for short stints at cutting shows. The benefits to the cattleman are still there, just in the pocketbook rather than on the hoof.

Cattle that are sent to cutting events are used for a few days at a time rather than the several weeks a trainer may keep a herd. This short time frame means the cattle are less likely to learn to mind their manners, and they won't see the weight gain benefits of training cattle. In fact, show cattle are more likely to undergo a phenomenon cattlemen call "shrink."

"We've weighed cattle going out to see how much they did shrink," related Jenkins. "Depending on how far they go, they'll usually shrink about four to six percent, but that's moisture shrink and cattle gain it all back within 24 hours after they're back (at the ranch.)"

"We don't cut these cattle long enough to really create a loss of weight," continued Jenkins. "You're going to lose some moisture weight, but these cattle are fed and on water when they're at the cuttings anyway. A cutter has 2½ minutes in the pen, and you probably don't use a cow

more than 25-30 seconds. Then he goes to the practice pen, then he goes back on feed and water, and then he goes home. It's really a pretty soft deal."

While a cow may not lose weight at a show, he also generally doesn't show any weight gain. So why would a cattleman want to supply cattle for cutting shows? The answer, says Riddle, is simple economics.

"It's always been my observation that from the time the cow goes into the arena at the cutting until he goes home, he's not going to gain any weight," said Riddle. "Normally they're going to be home a couple of days before they get back on the road to gaining weight. What a cow man figures, then, is how much weight did he not gain? It's not how much weight he lost, it's how much weight he did not gain while they used him at the cutting."

For example, if a cow is gaining between 1½ and two pounds per day at the ranch and he is shipped to a cutting for four days, he has not gained six to eight pounds because of the trip. If you can sell that cow for 90 cents per pound, you have effectively lost between \$5.40 and \$7.20 from sending your cow to that cutting.

However, if the cutting association is paying you \$10-15 for the use of that cow, you have still made money.

"If you can make more money by us using him than you can make by you keeping him, then you're better off if we use him," continued Riddle. "The only cattlemen that don't understand that are the ones that haven't leased their cattle to anybody."

Bellenfant agreed, saying, "I don't see any (physical) benefits to cattle that go to shows. There's too much shrink on them. The benefit to whoever sends them is in how much money they get paid."

"I think there's a misconception that the rancher really doesn't care (about cutting)," added Jenkins. "He does care. The rancher that is supplying cattle to cuttings is doing it for a reason. He's doing it for financial gain. I have seen an upswing in the relationship that has probably happened in the past 10 years. And that is because the cutting organizations can finally pay the rancher enough to make it worth his while. To the rancher, it's all about financial gain."

To the cutter, having a reliable supply of good cattle has obvious benefits for training and showing. The benefits also extend to cattlemen, however, through gentler cattle, more weight gain and financial rewards. No matter how you look at it, it's a win-win situation.