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Rolling Ropers

There were three of us riding in the front of the pickup this beautiful spring day. It was calving time on the Mitchell Ranch and we had just finished feeding the cow/calf pairs. Doug, Mark, and I were headed back toward the buildings for dinner when someone noticed a cow in need of attention.

The cow had not "cleaned" after calving - the placenta had not been expelled. This is not an uncommon occurrence, but it must be treated. A cow left alone will likely develop a uterine infection that can leave her very ill, and probably barren. Treatment involves donning a long veterinary obstetrical glove to clean out the putrid material and insert antibiotic boluses.

We were in a big bunch of cows, a couple of miles from the barn. Doug, the boss, did not particularly enjoy horses, nor was he a proficient roper. He considered the time it would take to drive home, catch and saddle horses, ride back out and find the cow, then take her back to the barn, versus roping her here and now.

We checked out the pickup for the necessary supplies: behind the seat were lariats; under the seat was a box of gloves; in the jockey box was a jar of antibiotic boluses. We had all the equipment, and the cow was in sight.

The decision was made. I raised questioning eyebrows at my brother Mark as each of us took a rope and climbed into the back. Doug put the rig in gear, and off we went after the cow.

A good rope horse will put you right up on a critter, and follow at an appropriate distance. He can keep the roper within range wherever the cow chooses to go. A pickup has enough speed, but nowhere near the agility of an animal. And pickups don't maneuver well the various obstructions indigenous to prairie pastures.

Another advantage of a horse is in the stability of the rider. Sitting astraddle the horse and having two stirrups for balance is considerably less precarious than standing in the bed of a moving pickup.

But Doug pulled in beside the cow as Mark and I swung our loops. When she saw us coming,

the old girl sensed danger and headed off at a high lope. As the pickup closed the gap, we each took a swing and a miss, and watched as the cow ducked off to the left. There was just enough time for us to brace as Doug swung around for another pass at our quarry.

The cow was onto our game now, and the next time around she was quicker on the dodge. We weren't as close to the cow as we'd have been ahorseback, and we were off at a bad angle. Both our loops came up empty again.

We were coming up behind the cow for the third time and gaining, when Mark hollered and Doug hit the brakes. We were thrown against the cab as the pickup slid to a stop just short of an irrigation ditch.

It took awhile to find a crossing suitable for a pickup, and get over to where the cow was now standing - time enough for her catch her breath for the next heat of the race.

We made several more runs with much the same results. As soon as we were close enough for a throw, the rig would have to swerve around a rock or a bush, or the cow would duck off to the side and lose us. Mark and I in the back were fighting to stay aboard our wildly gyrating "steed".

Finally Mark connected with a loop. Then we were faced with another problem - there was no saddle horn on which to dally.

Roping technique has two basic divisions - "dally" roping, or "hard and fast". Rodeo calf ropers tie hard and fast: the end of the rope is knotted to the horn. Team ropers in a rodeo use the dally method - once the loop is in place on an animal, the cowboy jerks up the slack and takes a turn around the horn to hold it.

In some parts of the country, all roping is done hard and fast. "If I catch it, I keep it" is the rallying cry of the proponents of that method. This allows the rider to leave his horse and go down the rope to the calf.

The prairie ropers of Montana mostly use the dally style of roping. The word "dally" comes from the Spanish "dar le vuelta", meaning "give the turn".

The originators of the dally technique were the old Spanish Vaqueros. Their rawhide lariats were not strong enough to take the jerk of a heavy animal, so they had to "play" the rope, much like a fisherman landing a big catch. Vaqueros used long ropes, and played the slack around the broad wooden horns of their Spanish style saddles.

With no saddle horn on which to "give a turn", we scrambled to get the end of the rope secured to something solid before it pulled through our hands. Finding the spare tire rack in the pickup box, we

quickly threaded the rope through and made a knot.

When the lariat was tied off, we hollered for Doug to stop. After bringing the pickup to a halt, Doug opened his door to step out. But he quickly changed directions as he saw the trajectory of the angry cow. Doug was on his way out the off-side door when the cow hit. Her weight folded the open driver's door forward into the front fender, nearly tearing it off its hinges.

Doug kept glancing back at the deformed cab as we worked at catching the cow's hind legs. But we were again faced with the disadvantage of being without a horse.

In order to "heel" a critter it is necessary for the legs to be moving. A horse can pull an animal in a circle while the heeler lays the trap-loop to pick up the hind legs.

The cow was hot, tired, and angry. She was secured to the pickup with thirty feet of nylon lariat. Whenever one of us would come near her with a second rope, the cow would charge.

Finally, Mark went out as a decoy while I maneuvered into position behind the cow. When the mad mamma charged Mark, I was able to flip a loop into position to catch her hind legs.

With a critter squirming on one end, the heel rope must be kept tight. If the loop is allowed to loosen, the animal will kick free.

From a saddle, a man can take a turn around his rubber covered horn and let the horse's weight do all the work. From the ground, holding onto a rope affixed to the back end of an angry 1200 pound cow is quite a struggle.

The process of catching that cow had burned a lot of time and energy. We had chased her over hill and dale before the final hand to hand combat. By the time we had the cow immobilized, the offending afterbirth had dropped free. We had only to insert the antibiotic boluses to complete the task which we had begun a half hour earlier.

It took some prying to get the mangled door shut. Doug was quiet as we drove home for dinner, and we were respectfully sober. As long as that pickup was on the ranch it would be a constant reminder of the foolishness of trying to save time by using a pickup to do the job of a horse.