



Buffalo

*Heifers are woolly good
workout for cutters.*

**Story and photos
By Jill J. Dunkel**

Goals

BUFFALO. ONCE NOMADS THAT ROAMED THE HIGH PLAINS OF North America, these large beasts are now commonplace in cutting horse training operations.

What?!? Buffalo and cutting horses?

Have these trainers lost their minds? Simply put, no.

Instead they have discovered the benefits of using buffalo to supplement cattle in their training operations.

Bringing buffalo to the cutting pen is not a new concept. The idea of “cutting” buffalo dates back to the 1950s. According to Tim Frasier, owner of the Texas Buffalo Exchange and Frasier Cutting Horses, legendary cutting horse trainer Buster Welch trained his horses in the pasture in the 1960s and occasionally worked older buffalo in a pasture setting. In fact, cutting old-timers talk of a cutting where a buffalo was mixed in with a herd of sour cattle, and the cutting was won by the horse that cut the buffalo.

Using buffalo to train cutting horses has been a strong source of conversation at cuttings and among horsemen for the last several years. More and more cutters are trading in their cattle for buffalo at home. However, in the beginning, many didn't like the results. Stories passed around the barns were horrific, Frasier said.

“You'd hear of buffalo running horses out of the arena and all kinds of wrecks,” he said. “But then we'd go home and work our buffalo and wonder, why can't everyone have such a pleasant experience?”

A little detective work led Frasier to discover that most negative experiences were a product of misinformation to horsemen or a lack of information from the bison calf supplier. Horsemen either bought poor quality buffalo, or their buffalo were not trained to work well with horses.

So Frasier began educating horsemen on how to train and use buffalo in horse-training operations. For the past 10 years, Frasier and his wife, Rhonda, have been helping others enjoy the benefits of buffalo.

“I talk to people about utilizing buffalo in horse training operations as many as eight to 10 times per day,” he said.

His efforts to educate horsemen led to the development of his buffalo business, the Texas Buffalo Exchange.

Buffalo vs. Cattle

BUFFALO HAVE TAKEN SHAPE AS AN INDUSTRY STANDARD IN the last five years.

“They are no longer a novelty,” Frasier said.

As word has spread about the buffalo's hardiness, longevity



In the training process, Frasier teaches the buffalo that the center of the arena is sacred. He begins each riding session by loping circles around the bison that stand in the middle of the pen.



Some cutting buffalo can be used by working cow horse trainers after their days in the cutting pen. “A cow horse man can fence and circle buffalo just like a calf if they are trained well in the beginning,” Frasier said, adding more value to buffalo.

and predictability, their value in a training operation has become well-known.

“One of the many advantages of buffalo is their ability to last an indefinite period of time,” Frasier explained. “A group of buffalo will last months, even years, whereas a herd of cattle needs to be replaced typically every 30 days.”

For example, if a trainer has 12 horses on cattle, to do a good job he will need two cows per horse every week, or 24 cows, Frasier said. Every two weeks, those cattle will need to be replaced. If he's lucky and those cattle are really good, he might keep them for three to four weeks.

“But basically, every two to four weeks, you get new cattle in. They have to adjust to their environment. You have to doctor them and so forth, and feed that cow as much as he can eat so he won't lose weight – maybe even gain a little – while you've got him,” Frasier said.

Most trainers have two loads of cattle at all times, he explained. One load they are getting “straightened out,” letting them adjust to their new surroundings and so forth, and the other load they use to work horses.

Compare that to how buffalo fit into an operation. If a trainer is riding the same 12 horses on cattle, he needs 12 to 15 head of buffalo.

“When he receives those buffalo, they will need two weeks to adjust to their surroundings. Then it typically takes anywhere from six days to three weeks to train buffalo to work well with horses,” Frasier explained. “Once they are acclimated and trained, that group of buffalo will last one to two years.”

Feed costs are basically the same for buffalo and cattle, and as long as buffalo are maintained with good nutrition, they rarely get sick. Since buffalo last much longer than cattle, factors such as freight, yardage, time involved in changing cattle and the risk of receiving sour cattle are eliminated. Exact costs per head vary depending on market conditions, but generally buffalo heifers cost about the same as cattle. Buffalo ranchers typically sell heifers to horsemen.

Longevity is another benefit buffalo provide to cutting horse trainers, as they can be worked individually for a longer period of time.

“The No. 1 frustration of any trainer is when a cow runs out just before the horse ‘gets it.’ You don't have to worry about that with buffalo. She's still there, working for you,” Frasier said. “It gives your younger and older horses alike more opportunities to repeat their work.”

“You get those additional two turns in before you quit without having to get another cow. The buffalo won't quit you like a cow will.”

The buffalo's predictability can also be used to a trainer's advantage. Once you get to know your buffalo and their individual personalities, you can predict what kind of challenge they will offer a horse and hand-pick specific buffalo based on the needs of that horse on any given day.

"This allows a trainer to set up a colt for specific work and can give a colt confidence once he has mastered that skill," Frasier said.

Frasier thinks there are benefits to working all ages and skill levels of horses on buffalo. The predictability is an obvious advantage for working colts. But buffalo can also be a good way to freshen up an open horse, preparing him for competition. Buffalo are crisper through the turns than cattle and can be quicker, Frasier said.

"If a horse is good at buffalo, cattle are easy after that."

Training Horses with Buffalo

THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS TO USE BUFFALO IN A HORSE TRAINING operation. One of the most popular is one-on-one in a round pen. This only works after the buffalo has been exposed to a horse in the arena by itself without being worked.

"This is a good way to work young horses and is used to slow down a buffalo that is too fast," Frasier said.

A single buffalo can also be placed in a herd of sour cattle to allow a horse to experience herd work.

"A buffalo doesn't really want to be with cattle, so she won't try too hard to get back to the herd," Frasier said.

Three buffalo in a herd of cattle can add some challenge to the herd work. One buffalo cut out of the group will try to return to her bison buddies.

"It is important to have three buffalo for this exercise," Frasier explained. "Buffalo are herd animals. They don't like to be alone. By placing three buffalo in a pen of cattle, when you sort out one buffalo to cut, there are still two buffalo in the herd. If you only had two buffalo, the single buffalo left in the cow herd might try to join the sorted buffalo you are cutting."

Once the buffalo are well-broken, buffalo can be worked in a herd just as a cow herd would be. Frasier also practices with bison by placing the herd in a holding pen adjacent to

the arena. He cuts one buffalo in the arena in front of an open gate going into the holding pen.

"That really puts a new dimension on a buffalo," Frasier said. "If you think your buffalo is about through, try that, and you will find that he's probably not."

Turnback horses can also be used to help position the buffalo.

"I tell my turnback help to ride the buffalo's hip ahead of their hooks," Frasier explained. "The buffalo know which horse can hold them and which horse can't. Occasionally, they will cut the turnback horse rather than the cutting horse."

Buffalo Training and Care

FRASIER'S EXPERIENCE WITH HANDLING AND TRAINING BUFFALO has convinced him they are extremely smart.

"They know the horses in the barn and their weak points. I have a horse that will always go for a head fake, and we have one buffalo that knows this. When I cut this buffalo, he will throw his head one way then lunge another way because he knows this particular horse will fall for it.

"It's like a game to them," he said. "If you break them properly and feed them well, they are playing while you work them. Those that last the longest think they are playing a game with your horse."

Training buffalo for use in a horse operation is not difficult, according to Frasier.

"I refer customers to very accomplished bison breakers on a regular basis."

But Frasier thinks it is worth the time and effort for horsemen to learn to train their buffalo themselves.

"It is very simple, and it helps someone understand the buffalo. Someone who trains his own buffalo typically gets more out of them just because he understands them."

To educate horsemen, Frasier and his wife produced a 70-minute step-by-step video. They also wrote a brochure on bison health and husbandry.

"And I tell people I'm a phone call away for customers in the middle of buffalo breaking if they have any questions," he said.



Frasier has owned these bison heifers for almost a year, and they are well-broken. Here he demonstrates sorting a buffalo out of the herd to cut, just as would be done with cattle.



Rhonda Frasier cuts a single buffalo from the herd on an experienced cutting horse. Tim Frasier thinks bison are valuable to freshen up an older horse. "Buffalo are crisper through the turns than cattle," Frasier explained. "After they practice with buffalo, cattle are easy."

Training typically takes six days to six weeks. "The biggest thing is to pay attention to the buffalo and allow them time to settle into their environment. When they are playing with each other, they are ready for training," Frasier said.

Buffalo are herd animals and exhibit family group behaviors that will be evident as they become comfortable with their environment. Understanding herd behavior helps the horseman with bison, from handling to feeding. There will often be dominant or lead animals, submissive animals, guards and warriors.

Although proper training and care is important, if the buffalo are not purchased from a reputable source and their history documented, they might not work in a horse training operation.

All of Frasier's buffalo are ranch-direct, delivered to his facility and have been properly preconditioned at the ranch.

"By following these strict guidelines for our product, we have not lost one buffalo calf at our place waiting to be sold. Each time a wild calf is handled before we get it, it creates mental trauma. We do what we can to minimize that baggage. Because of that, we do not purchase any buffalo through a sale ring."

In addition to selling buffalo calves, Frasier also provides a market for buffalo yearlings when cutting horse trainers are finished with them.

"If a horseman keeps a buffalo on a good plan of nutrition and deworms her regularly, she should gain weight and be a marketable yearling," Frasier explained. "Depending on

market factors at the time, a trainer should expect to at least get his money back or maybe even make a little if he's taken care of his buffalo."

The growing buffalo meat market provides a demand for yearling buffalo ready to go into a feedyard.

"A horse-training operation is the perfect preconditioning program for these buffalo," Frasier explained.

Some cutting buffalo can even be used by working cow horse trainers for up to a year after their use in the cutting pen.

"If they are properly broke, a cow horse man can fence and circle buffalo just like a calf if they are trained well in the beginning," Frasier said, adding that well-started buffalo are comparable to well-started colts. Everything about the future is in the start.

"No matter how you slice it, buffalo definitely have a place in horse training operations," Frasier said. "Some people say they don't want another cow on their place after working buffalo. We don't promote that entirely. I still say there is no substitute for a good, fresh cow. However, a properly trained buffalo is a close second and lasts indefinitely.

"We try our best to get the horsemen to see buffalo as buffalo. Many of our customers compare them to many different animals that they have experience with. This in itself is a unique quality of the buffalo, and once appreciated by the horseman, is the key to success." ■

Jill J. Dunkel is a special contributor to The American Quarter Horse Journal. To comment on this story, write to aqhajrnl@aqha.org.



TIM and RHONDA FRASIER have been assisting horsemen with buffalo for the past 10 years. The couple operates Frasier Cutting Horses and the Texas Buffalo Exchange from their training facility in Gainesville, Texas. In the last three years, Frasier has handled more than 13,000 buffalo, sold more than 3,000 buffalo to horsemen and has trained more than 600. The Frasier's use "Trixie" as a good-will ambassador to prove bison are trainable, taking the buffalo to schools and other events where they educate people about bison. "Buffalo are extremely smart. Trixie hauls in a trailer with horses, leads and shakes her head yes and no," Frasier said. "We have even taught her to fetch a ball for a bite of grain."

Frasier talks to as many as eight to 10 people a day about using buffalo in a horse training operation. "We even offer to help our competitors that also sell buffalo, as long as they provide quality animals for sale and are willing to pass on credible information."

Frasier strives to educate not only horsemen but also buffalo ranchers. "There is a good business opportunity here. Our objective is to make it good for all involved."

