

On being a farm wife - And other hazards

Joyce Bupp



Bruised. Black-n-blue. Battered. Bashed.

Abuse is a daily fact of life here on the farm. The abuse inflicted — though real and sometimes painful — is not a criminal nature. It's professional abuse. Cow abuse — or rather, our abuse at the hands, er, feet, tails, heads, horn stubs, etc. of our bovine friends.

A scab healing on my left kneecap marks a recent abuse incident, inflicted by Pokey. Pokey is a young cow, nearing the end of her first lactation of milking. When she calved for the first time many months ago, Pokey was not thrilled about the milking process, accepting it as an inconvenience in exchange for the tons of feed she stows away. Some days, Pokey danced around. Other times, she lifted her right foot and impolitely removed the source of distraction that took her attention from gobbling down feed.

As do most young first-time milking heifers, Pokey settled into the routine. She now lives up to her name, dawdling around the dairy barn before entering her stall and lounging around when it's time to be milked. She is relatively cooperative about the whole process, except for her habit of inching her back end over to hog up stall space from her neighbor and mess it up.

While inching around a few evenings ago, Pokey managed to jiggle the milkers loose before she was finished being milked out. When I moved to reattach them, Pokey — lightning fast with an unexpected mule-like rear kick — nailed my kneecap. I limped away, victimized once again by cow abuse.

Pam, our afternoon co-milker, regularly suffers a different sort of abuse from our Ango cow. Ango is a lover, an affectionate, friend-

ly, puppy-dog kind of cow.

She chews on milkers. Human milkers, that is.

Ango has a stretch tongue, one which can reach your hair, your hat, your elbow, your face, and constantly tries to lick your head while you wash and prep her for milking. If a hat's not handy to grab, well, there's always hair. Pam's long, dark hair is a perfect target for Ango's over-eager affections.

While there's no proof, we have long suspected that the herd milking veterans, on occasion while looking to be innocently lounging around the meadow, are actually holding anti-social behavioural pattern seminars for the first-calf heifers.

One technique they surely teach is head bashing.

Head bashing, on the surface, is a display that masquerades as affection and friendliness but with

macho overtones. It takes place when the cows are being tied into the stalls. Such regular, everyday handling helps keep cows tame; it also offers them golden head-bashing opportunities.

Just as you fasten her neck string to the fastening hook, a headbasher swings her big, bone-hard-head against your arm and elbow with a solid whack. Most successful are those girls that have a small section of horn which for whatever reason was not completely removed in her calthood days. A horn stub is a bruise-inflicting weapon. A full horn, complete with point, is downright dangerous.

Even more fun for cows, it seems, is the "sandwich maneuver."

The sandwich maneuver is a team effort, in which the human interacting with the cows is put in the position of a piece of bologna

wedged between two hunks of roll — or at least two big hunks of cow hindquarter.

Cows — usually two of the biggest in the herd — turn in opposite direction simultaneously, catching the human in the middle between two heavy butt ends. Result ranges anywhere from the human expelling a breathless "Ooooff!" sound to limping off with bruised ribs. (The person, not the cows.)

Short of passing a law (no, no, not more laws! against cow abuse, victims of this professional hazard have little recourse, save being on constant alert to prevent occurrence.

Suits of armor for milking are just too awkward.

Besides, they'd soon rust with the "showers" those girls occasionally rain on us.

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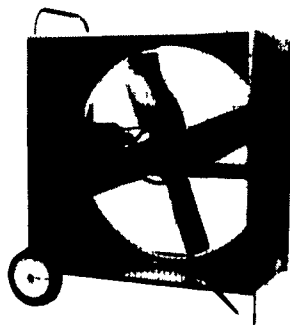


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