Livestock Transportation Training
Programs that Teach Practical Pig Handling Skills

Nancy Lidster

DNL Farms Ltd., PO Box 160, White Fox, SK S0J 3B0
Email: dnlfarms@xplornet.com

■ Premise

Right from early childhood, we learn many skills and abilities by modelling the behaviour of people around us; watching and mimicking what they do in order to walk, talk, text, drive... Modelling doesn't just help us learn how to do things. It shows us what is possible; “if one person can do it, anyone can do it”.

By watching handlers of all skill levels working with pigs in a variety of situations, we find recurring patterns in the interactions between pigs and handlers. The truly amazing handlers show us what is possible and demonstrate skills that can help all handlers move pigs more effectively. Handlers who struggle help us understand the causes of pig handling problems and how we can avoid them. Video lets us capture, compare, and share these pig handling models so handlers can gain from the knowledge and experience of other handlers.

■ Process

In 2007, Daryl Toews was dispatcher for Lester Reimer Trucking, which has since been purchased by Steve’s Livestock Transport. Daryl arranged for me to travel with their drivers, mount video cameras in their trailers and record some 50-60 hours of pig loading and unloading on pot trailers. We also had the cooperation and assistance of the farms of origin and the various parties taking delivery of the feeder pigs and market hogs.

With only a couple of exceptions, animals were brought to the trailer with whatever tools and group sizes each producer normally used. We received
groups of from 4 - 6 market hogs up to 20+ at a time, depending on the farm and the compartment being loaded. Rather than trying to stage some mythical ideal, we worked with whatever the trucker normally had to deal with and learned what we could from the range of conditions, pigs, people, and approaches presented. We were interested in problem situations, easy pig movement, and everything in between.

In most cases, the person in the trailer received feeder pigs with a board and paddle but in a couple of cases a prod was carried. Most feeder pig unloading was done with a paddle and board. A prod was carried with a minimum of electric shock use during most market hog loading and a paddle was carried during most market hog unloads.

- **Outcome: Low Stress Pig Handling Course for Truckers**

The video we collected provided the basis for a pig handling course for truckers (www.dnlfarmstraining.com). The course was originally delivered in classroom and was later adapted for on-line delivery so it could be purchased and accessed by truckers or trucking companies at any time. Course contents were broken down into sections covering basic pig handling concepts and the loading and unloading of each compartment of a pot trailer.

- **Why a course specifically for truckers?**

The relatively small crowded spaces of transport trailers and the restricted openings to some trailer compartments, limit pigs’ ability to move and respond freely to drivers and other pigs. These conditions invite a shift in pig responses that can be problematic, especially for drivers who don’t understand them and try to use a chase approach to force pig movement.

Despite the potential for challenges, countless drivers routinely load and unload pot trailers with little difficulty. They prove that pigs can be moved effectively on trailers. They also provide a model that other drivers can follow to achieve similar positive results.

Handling concepts of particular importance to truckers are:

- the links between pigs’ fear levels and pigs’ herd behaviour and need to track us and
- the role our own instincts play in the way we try to move pigs.
- **Pigs’ Instincts**

Anytime we start moving pigs, their behaviour tends to become defensive or safety oriented and they try to respond to us in ways that let them:

- Get release from our pressure
- Keep us out of their flight zones
- Keep track of us
- Stay with the herd.

Pigs’ efforts to meet all these safety needs produce predictable response patterns. If we understand those patterns and the conditions that trigger them, we can anticipate and manipulate pigs’ responses to our advantage.

When we allow pigs to meet their safety needs, they stay calm and relatively easy to control. When we don’t allow pigs to meet their safety needs we see a number of changes as they become more scared or more defensive:

- their body language changes to reflect their changing mental and emotional states
- their herd behaviour changes. They are more likely to Circle back or Bunch together, and less likely to Flow.
- they pay closer attention to us; trying to either keep us in sight or hold still and listen intently to track us

Pig moving problems usually occur because the handler has failed to recognize and respond appropriately to pigs’ natural movement patterns and to pigs’ defensive or fear-driven changes in behaviour.

- **Human Instincts**

We’re often unaware of the influence our own instincts have on the way we try to move pigs. Unmonitored and unchecked, our instincts are to chase animals to make them move. We tend to work too much behind pigs, use too much pressure, and not give release. Emotions such as feeling rushed, anxious, or frustrated tend to intensify our instinctive responses and make matters worse.

When handlers use fear to chase pigs they often shove into pigs’ flight zones and show no regard for pigs’ other safety needs, to: get release from pressure, keep track of the handler, and stay with the herd. When pigs can’t get away from a handler who is chasing them, they switch tactics, for example: circle back or stop moving.
Handlers who move pigs effectively tend to be more aware and responsive to their pigs’ behaviour and less driven by their own instincts. They read and respond to the pigs’ body language cues and adjust their own behaviour to make it safer and easier for pigs to go where they want them to go.

The Link between Fear and Herd Behaviour

Pigs are usually moved in groups and display some form of herd behaviour. Their herd behaviour takes three distinct forms:

- Flowing - the herd is moving. Pigs move to stay with the herd.
- Bunching - the herd is stopped. Pigs stop moving and bunch together to stay with the herd.
- Circling – pigs circle to get out of a handler’s pressure

The different forms of herd behaviour are not inherently good or bad; their usefulness depends on what we are trying to accomplish. Example: Bunching herd behaviour is a nuisance when we want pigs to move but helpful when we want pigs to hold still to be ear tagged or injected.

Flowing herd behaviour produces the movement we typically want and is most likely to occur when pigs are calm and have ample space to move around. As pigs become more crowded or more scared and distrustful, they track us more carefully and are more likely to either Bunch up and quit moving or Circle back.

The close confines of a trailer naturally shift pigs’ herd responses in the direction of Bunching or Circling. Thus it is important to keep pigs calm, use our position effectively, and manage pigs’ herd behaviour. In particular, we want to avoid Bunching and use our position, pressure, and release to guide Circling or Flow in the desired direction.

Ease of pig movement is largely determined by how well we manage pigs’ herd behaviour. Instead of relying on their flight zones to chase pigs away, we need to use; pigs’ flight zones, our release, pressure, and our position, to set up the desired form of herd behaviour and guide pigs’ attention and movement where we want them to go.
Summary

Effective pig handling for transport starts with understanding pigs' herd responses and movement patterns and requires that drivers recognize and respond appropriately to:

- pigs' physical cues, especially
  - signs of changing fear or defensiveness and
  - what pigs are paying attention to and where that is drawing them
- the handler's own instinctive urges

Video models help truckers develop the observation skills and understanding they need to move pigs effectively. *Video will be used to demonstrate the principles outlined.*