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VELVETTING

By Andy Cowan

On September 11th, I attended the VicBranch AGM at Sue and Richard Coffin's farm near Ballarat. After the meeting (and all things formal), we went for a farm walk. Richard's pastures were looking fabulous and, as it was still fairly early in the spring, I assume they are looking even more spectacular at present. Although the stags were a little shy about a group of strangers wandering around the farm (the kangaroo was also a little timid), we saw enough to realise that all of their hard work over the years has been well worth the effort.

There were a couple of new members present and I was talking to one of them who seemed a bit concerned about velvetting. Of course, each of us has our own idiosyncrasies when it comes to aspects of velvetting. As most of us have built our own yards, and possibly re-built our own yards, our handling methods are as individual as the yards themselves. However, there are many velvetting procedures that are common to all farmers who cut velvet. These common procedures stem from the National Velvet Accreditation Course, an essential pre-requisite for all velvet farmers. One of the strengths of the course is that it teaches us the importance of effective pain relief. The following ideas come from my experience of velvetting stags and, although a lot of trial and error has been involved, I am getting better and more confident about handling stags of different sizes/types/temperaments. But remember that there is always one stag/animal that will try to disprove any theories and practices you may have developed. We need to be vigilant and well-prepared.

I am making the assumption that the majority of farmers who velvet more than half a dozen stags own a crush. I have a hydraulic crush but some use a drop-floor crush. Farmers with a small number of animals would be better off getting their local vet to help them velvet their stags. In this case, a general anaesthetic may be used as well as the local. As deer farmers can appreciate, confidence will increase only by velvetting many stags.

There are two major considerations as to how you choose to get the stag into the crush. The first is your own safety. The second is to ensure that the stag does not damage his velvet. In my case, I have the facilities to run a mob of up to 60 or 70 (depending on age and stage of velvet development) into my yards. I can then sort and break them down into mobs of anything up to 6 (depending on size). The pen used to draft a stag into the crush will only have three mature stags in it. This is just the way my pens/yards work – I can get in with the stags and separate one out without pressuring the animals. I find this reduces the chance of an accident. You are the best judge of your animal. By knowing the temperament of each one and being aware of which ones need more space, you increase the likelihood of keeping yourself safe and ensuring the velvet is not damaged.

Once again, getting the stag into the crush will depend on your yard set up. I always work my deer by myself – unless I have a visitor or friend wanting to check out what happens when antler is removed. I have the ability, as the yards have been designed around my safety, to push the stags into the crush using a series of doors. The stags seem less apprehensive when being pushed by a door rather than myself. From my perspective, I prefer that any animal associates me with random acts of

kindness such as supplementary feeding and supplying fresh pastures. So for this exercise I am not the thing doing the pushing!!

OK...the stags are in the crush. There are a couple of “variations on a theme” in the next few minutes (when isn’t there with farming!!). First, and by far the best scenario, is the stag that stands patiently while you close the crush and adjust the height of the crush to hold his head firmly. Thankfully, this is the case with the vast majority of stags. Not so good are the stags that want to drop their heads while you are attempting to close the crush. My heart rate climbs a bit here as the potential of losing a year’s production becomes a possibility. When this happens to me, I generally set the crush to its lowest level and with the aid of a rag, I try to distract him to get his attention away from the movement of the crush. Be careful of the front legs in this situation. The third scenario in this procedure is that the stag simply lies down on the floor of the crush. The ever increasing fragility of my body tells me not to be a hero here. I simply open the exit of the crush, let him out and walk him quietly around the yards and bring him straight back into the crush again. This is time consuming and I went through this sequence four times in a row with one stag until he finally got the message. Like any animal, good training and the development of the correct behaviour saves a lot of frustration and work in the long run.

If all goes well, the stag will be in the crush and have a tourniquet on within a minute. In the Coffin’s yards they also place a halter around the nose of the stag in order to give the head greater stability. I also use one of these but I modified mine slightly. The same end result is achieved. I also throw a damp cloth over the stag’s eyes and nose - it seems to quieten them down a little.

The next step in my operation is the injection of a local anaesthetic. We must consider the welfare of the stag and our aim is to minimise both the pain and the stress of the procedure. For the less experienced operator the ring block is the preferred method of injecting the lignocaine. The ring block, although using slightly more lignocaine than the regional block gives absolute pain relief. In my situation, I am confident enough with skills to use the regional block and also give the stag absolute pain relief. For many years I velvetted about 400 stags but at the moment I am only doing about 200.

For over 15 years I have been using the soft pack/vaccinating gun combination. I originally started out by drawing down lignocaine from the 100ml glass bottles with a syringe but quickly found this time-consuming and awkward. With the 200ml soft packs I simply hold the string tied to the pack **(see picture)** in my teeth, have the volume set on 3ml in the vaccinating gun and the injection procedure takes less than 10 seconds. As a personal preference, I use the regional nerve block. I have found that the ring block is a little more difficult to do with the tourniquet on, especially with older stags.



My technique using the ring block seems to blunt the needle more often than not - probably need more practice. Anyway, once the anaesthetic is injected, I have plenty to do in the next 5 minutes.

The size of the needle is important to me. I have photographed four different sized needles that I have experimented with in the past **(see pictures)**. My main concern with the needle is that it maintains its sharpness throughout the four injections and that the lignocaine comes out fairly rapidly. Despite taking precautions, I cannot assume that the head of the stag will remain absolutely motionless when the injecting takes place, so the quicker the procedure is completed the better. The thinnest needle – 22g x 1.5” – bends too much and needs much more effort to actually inject the fluid. Also, as it is 1.5” long, the sharpness of the needle can be lost more easily if it hits a bone should that ever happen. The 21g x 1” still needs quite a bit of effort to inject. However it maintains

its sharpness and would be my second choice. I find the 20g x 1" is the most versatile and most suits my requirements for velvetting. It is quite rigid, remains sharp and allows the quick release of any fluid with similar viscosity to lignocaine. The final needle is the 18g x 1". I find this too big for the "hardness" of the skin. I use this sized needle when injecting a more viscous fluid into the animal and when I know the animal will not move.



As I work and velvet the stags by myself, I find that by working slowly both the animal and I are more comfortable. I do a more thorough job of record keeping. I allow about 10 minutes per stag when planning velvetting. As I mentioned above, the five minutes it takes for the local anaesthetic to take effect can be well utilised. After the injection, I place the NVAS tags on the brow tynes of the stag. This is immediately recorded in my notebook along with the ear tag number. I then measure the grade of each stick of velvet and record this. I also make note of any temperament "issues" – whether he grinds his teeth, ducks his head or stands up to me when drafting. I then weigh the velvet of the previous stag and note this. I also make a note of the previous stag's velvet blood colour and if the circulation of the blood to the antler was not good. I then make a decision whether to cull the previous animal or not. Generally I find older stags and stags that have some sort of health issues (not necessarily clinical) have reduced blood flow to the antler – so they are sold off. Also, if there is a large variation in the weights of each antler (10%), I try to find a reason or at least highlight this fact. Finally, I take a photo from two angles of the antler while it is still on the stag. The first photo is taken from the front to include the ear tag. The second photo is taken from the side to remind me of the confirmation of the antler. Then the five minutes is up and I can proceed to remove the antler. Once the tourniquet is removed the stag is immediately sent out to a paddock to join other velvetted stags.

After velvetting a couple of stags, I take all their velvet to the freezer. This is also a job that can be done while the anaesthetic is taking effect on another stag.

The saw used for the removal of antler can also be a personal preference. The saw that I now use is a tenon saw. I find that the strength of the blade and the fineness of the teeth help to produce a clean, straight cut with little wastage. I started out by using a keyhole saw – mainly because of the replaceable blade. However, over the years, it was the plastic handles that kept breaking. I still have a couple on hand just in case the position of the coronets on the head are too close together to use a tenon saw. Also, the coarser teeth in the keyhole saw means a rougher cut, more wastage and it is more difficult to get a perfectly straight cut. The final saw in the picture below is one I got from my vet. It is used when the antler has started to calcify. It is a "curved saw, with tri-edged, fast cut teeth and is 32 cm long". It is originally intended for dehorning cattle. I only have one of these as it is quite a large expense – about \$90. **(see picture)**



It is crucial that everything I need to velvet stags is convenient to the crush. The two pictures below illustrate how, within two steps, I have access to needles, drugs, record book, ear tags, marking pens, velvet measuring tape, velvet scales, velvet tags, clock, water, saws, vaccinating guns and tools for minor repairs and replacements. **(see pictures)**

Human and animal safety are so important. If anyone can help me refine my operation or simply has a few suggestions, please let us all know.

