



## Stunned

By David Schafer

The final handling of the poultry in our stewardship is an important one and a debated one. What is stunning? Why is it being recommended by an animal welfare group? Why have some members of the American Pastured Poultry Producers Association embraced stunning? Why have most not?

In electric stunning, a special knife delivering a concentrated electric current is used to first shock the bird, then sever the carotid artery. This evolved from the industrial model in which live birds are loaded from trucks onto shackles on a conveyor, which sends them through a shocking station that paralyzes them before a machine-operated knife cut is applied.

Stilling the bird for an accurate incision in a rapidly moving, automatic system is the purpose. In the sole large processing operation I have observed, the conveyor then travels a looping course through the "red room," finally bringing the fully exsanguinated (official industry term for 'bled out') bird into the disassembly line. Like everything in giant-scale poultry processing, stunning is an innovation to increase processing speed and, therefore, profitability. Later claiming it improves animal welfare is simply a deceitful industry spin.

Researchers have, not surprisingly, found stunning more humane in some studies, less humane in others. One side says the other's research is outdated, the other says sample size is too small and the technique is flawed.



David Schafer demonstrates a cut to the carotid artery.

The welfare groups stand by research that uses a very small sample size of a few birds and uses poor technique. One assistant holds the bird while another stuns or slits, introducing a huge opportunity to confound the data.

The holder can easily hold improperly, as we poultry experts know, and introduce stress. The stun only has to touch somewhere to work; the knife needs to be in the precise location with precise pressure and precise length of stroke. It is not mastered in a handful of birds.

When shown research suggesting that cutting yielded a more humane death, the welfare group dismissed the research as old.

Let's compare what happens to the animal in "stunning" and "bleeding."

### Stunning

An electric shock is delivered near the head, paralyzing the body. This makes the knife cut easy and prevents stressful flapping and possible bone dislocation or breaking and wing tip bruising, all good things to prevent. Inside, however, the body responds with an

extreme fight-or-flight reaction from the trauma. The heart races - a reaction of extreme fear and distress which evolved for life-threatening situations.

Blood pressure spikes so high after stunning that, if not released through an incision to a major artery, blood can burst through capillaries into muscle tissue, a phenomenon well known in the red meat industry as "blood splash," basically a full body stroke.

Because of the nervous system trauma induced in stunning, bleed out is significantly reduced. Joel Salatin, who always collects blood, reports only half the normal amount collected on a batch of hundreds of birds he had to take to a processor using a stun knife. The reduced bleed out results in an off flavor and unsightly darkness (blood) around the bones.

Other problems with stunning include:

- Variability in effectiveness. That is, it is fairly easy, so I have been told by a plant owner using a stun knife, to over- and under-stun birds. Over-stunned birds have their breast tissue blown out. Under-stunned birds are not rendered unconscious.
- It is a cost barrier, currently around \$1,000 to the small operator. (For the record, I declined on ethical grounds years ago when my company, Featherman Equipment, was asked to bring a more economical stun knife to market.)
- It is a safety hazard.
- It makes a "children unwelcome" working environment, defeating the primary purpose for many farms.

## Bleeding

Let me first say that bleeding without restraint is unacceptable and what led to stunning in the first place. Beheading and neck-wringing need to become obsolete ASAP if we intend to bring farm-raised poultry back into the future.

Bleeding consists of a single incision severing the carotid artery, done while the bird is inverted in a restraining cone. Inversion and cone restraint are two important elements (notably not included in the research comparing bleeding unfavorably). Inversion is disorienting and, therefore, de-sensitizing and it uses gravity to hasten blood loss. Restraining through the gentle encompassing pressure of a cone is soothing, as proven by noted autistic animal welfare authority Temple Grandin's building and using of her own "squeeze box" to calm her during her college years. (The movie *Temple Grandin* is a must watch, especially for livestock stewards). Anyone with poultry experience knows without a doubt when poultry are stressed and when not; restraining cones are obviously calming.

The act of gently extending the neck before the incision is the primary sensation experienced by the bird - providing the knife is sharp and the practitioner skilled. I would contend, and it is certainly my personal goal, that the properly executed cut is not felt. Blood pressure drops immediately and dramatically, giving that light-headed sensation with which we are all familiar, followed rapidly by black out.

Most importantly, there is no fight-or-flight reaction. The bird remains calm. The cardio-pulmonary system continues business as usual, pumping out the blood.

To me, this obviously represents a peaceful, respectful passing, but that is subjective. The difficulty with this issue is that those "recommending" stunning to our industry have a completely different world view about animals than those of us choosing pastured poultry as an enterprise worthy of pursuit.

Without actual experience of what stress looks like and doesn't look like, they have turned to science for their definitive answer. No one knows more than farmers how science can spin an issue like a roulette wheel and make the ball land on their number.

In protracted discussions, I asked the welfare folks to review videos on featherman.net to see how calm the birds remain throughout bleeding. They were not interested; their stance was set. They have chosen

research that best fits their world view, and we have the glorious opportunity to be happy and confident despite their implied incrimination of our standards; an opportunity to practice tolerance and non-opposition in an increasingly fractured, intolerant world. We plant our flag on the moral high ground.

Those few among the APPPA membership who choose to use stun knives fall into two categories. They are state or federally inspected and required to stun by their regulator. They are small and wish to display a third-party label showing customers that they care for their birds.

As in the corporate, high-speed model, their decision is entirely economic. I have no problem with that. But let's be perfectly clear: No one with experience stuns because they believe it to be more humane.

*David Schafer founded the Green Hills Farm Project grazers group in 1988 and Featherman Equipment in 1999.*

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