

Productive Struggle

THE LUXURY OF USING OXEN

by Rob Collins

As the teaching and farming season at Tillers International heats up for 2025, I think back to an Oxen Basics class in the mid 2000s. We were listening to Tillers' then-farm manager, Dulcy Perkins, talk about the various misbehaviors the oxen were showing that day. She reframed the experience by saying, "Some

places hold classes with perfectly trained animals, and they demonstrate what those animals can do. But when you go home, the animals won't be perfect for you at first. We don't want to give the impression that working animals is easy." To this day, I try to pass that wisdom on when I'm teaching, particularly around oxen, although that idea is embedded in Tillers' model of hands-on, rural skills education.



Tom Mahoney's team of Brown Swiss pull a road grader at Tillers in 2024.

If you missed the inaugural column in the last issue, welcome to a series on the happenings at Tillers International, based in Scotts, Mich. Last time, I dubbed Tillers “The Oxen University” for our work in researching and teaching low capital agricultural skills. In this issue, our focus turns to the luxury of teaching with, and about, oxen.

Of course, it’s worth keeping in mind that for our international work in the developing world, oxen really are a luxury for many farmers, who instead have to farm with rudimentary hand hoes and dibble sticks. But for this column, we’ll stick to why it’s a luxury to get to use oxen stateside in classes.

I’m finishing my 29th year of teaching high school, so I spend lots of time thinking about teaching and learning. The longer I teach, the more I focus on productive struggle: the concept that learning happens best, and fastest, when things are appropriately difficult. This week, my

psychology students were discussing the idea of hiring teachers with high GPAs. A sophomore in class said, “If the teacher always got good grades, they might not understand why students need to struggle to learn.” Amen.

In this context, oxen are ideal in a teaching setting. Oxen misbehave, but they do it slowly, at least compared to horses. Whereas horses tend to kick and bolt when they perceive danger, oxen usually telegraph their thinking before they act. Almost every time we teach an oxen class, we have some version of this exchange: A student will be walking along saying “Whoa!” repeatedly while the animals keep walking. An instructor will say, “Stop your feet and stand still while saying whoa.” The animals then stop, and everyone has a good chuckle. That slow misbehavior does much to help students learn how to solve problems in short order.





The 2023 Oxen Basics Class at Tillers International experimented with putting together a four-ox hitch made up of Rob Collins' Shorthorns and Devons.



A 10-week-old team of Devons are desensitized to traffic.



Tara Starling with Tillers' Pollux experimenting with a 3 pad collar and hay lift.

Additionally, oxen generally tolerate new teamsters and situations. Last fall, I took my Devon team to a harvest festival in the Plain community near Centreville, Mich. At one point during the morning, I noticed that we'd drawn a crowd and that eight kids were in physical contact with the team – including one touching each horn – while the team stood chewing their cud. It's often the people who are most nervous at the start of a class, rather than the animals. Usually, a long walk driving the lanes of the farm next to the oxen is enough to settle the humans. The oxen reassure the people more than the reverse.

The luxury in all of this is that the average beginner can quickly learn to handle a team. By the end of a week-long class, students often do real

farm work and teach others with minimal direct supervision. They often go home and successfully start their own oxen teams from calves. Imagine doing the same with horses after just a week of learning. A luxury indeed.

In a class setting, oxen allow for experimentation, a hallmark of Tillers' approach. Students who want to try something new – driving from behind, driving with lines, hitching multiple teams together, training a pair of calves – can give it a shot. If it works, we've all learned something new. If they fail at it, we've also learned something new. A student, George Franklin, asked me in a class one time, "Aren't we confusing your team and teaching them some bad habits?" I had to admit that they were. But, oxen are forgiving enough that it wasn't

anything I couldn't train back out of the team after the class.

Along those same lines, the forgiving nature of oxen allows students to get into a little trouble, which I find helpful. We can only practice being

resilient when we're a little over our heads in a task. Tillers' "attitude of experimentation" and use of oxen weave together seamlessly.

Stop by, and we'll get in a little trouble, but only a little.

RH



A student drives a young team through a small gate from behind.