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NDSU Extension Service

BeefTalk: Cowsonality -- Familiarity That Creates Producer Predictability

By Kris Ringwall, Extension Beef Specialist,

Developing and maintaining a producing cow herd is no easy task, but doing that task well is close to the heart of every producer. Even when the cows aren't tagged, every producer can pick out the favorite cow(s) and recite a unique story about many of them. Each cow develops her very own routine, making not only her looks but her actions different – her own cowsonality.

What is better then, should a producer buy replacements and adapt them to his operation or raise replacements from the producing cow herd? The cattle cycle, cost of the replacements, lifetime production values and salvage values help answer the question. But maintaining a functional cow herd is more than just what is on paper. That's where knowing the

cowsonality of your cow herd is important.

Much is said about the genetic influence of the sires but the core of the beef industry is the cow herd. At the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center, some heifers are purchased and others are raised. In most cases the performance is similar. But the exceptions are what creates economic chaos for cattle producers.

The application of benchmark values, averages and trends are important tools for success within the beef production business. They need to be applied correctly because a bad year can increase costs significantly.

As an example, I'll use our recent experiences calving purchased and raised heifers. In our sire selection one of our key criteria is calving ease.

The following is the data for three of the five Angus bulls used last year on mature cows: bull 196 had a birth weight EPD of +0.6 and produced calves weighing an average of 90.2 pounds with a calving ease score of 1; bull 211 had a birth weight EPD of +1.6 and produced calves weighing an average of 86.4 pounds with a calving ease score of 1; Bull 212 had a birth weight EPD of +2.3 and produced calves weighing an average of 87.2 pounds with a calving ease score of 1. The average birth weight for all Angus bulls was 87.1 pounds. Calving ease scores of 1 indicate that none of the calves were assisted. The larger the calving ease score, the more difficult delivery.

Our confidence level is high when utilizing these high-accuracy artificial insemination bulls for mature cows or heifers. The cleanup bulls are purchased, but utilized over multiple years to gain confidence in their ability to sire reasonable birth-weight calves. The birth-weight EPD for these Red

Angus bulls has averaged -0.6, and the actual birth weights for calves produced averaged 81.5 pounds.

This year, with the confidence of several years' data, the center exposed a group of purchased heifers with unknown backgrounds to the these same cleanup bulls. The heifers produced calves weighing an average of 82.3 pounds with a average calving ease score of 2.2. The bottom line: most heifers needed assistance with calving, with only 44 of the 55 heifers raising a calf.

The center's raised heifers, bred to these same bulls, produced what would have been expected, calves weighing an average of 76.5 pounds and born with little assistance (average calving ease score of 1.7).

Although there was nothing wrong with the purchased heifers, our lack of knowledge about their background had us gambling on how to manage them properly. We just didn't have the right numbers to predict the outcome of breeding them to our sires. That lack of data is resulting in a significant increase in the cost of production this year.

Making a cow herd functional and productive is the most difficult challenge producers have. Even the best advice needs to be filtered with attention to risk. Taking unnecessary risks may jeopardize a lifetime of work And of course, we must remember the reality that every cow in the herd has its own cowsonality.

The cow herd is a business, but remember to take care of that individual cowsonality and that cow will take care of you.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.COM on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0044.

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Calving Ease for Raised and Purchased Heifers		
NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center		
	Calving Ease Score	Average Birth Weight
Raised	1.7	76.5 lbs
Purchased	2.2	82.3 lbs

Calving Ease Scores:

1 – No Assistance	4 – Caesarean Section
2 – Some Assistance	5 – Abnormal Presentation
3 – Hard Pull	

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