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BeefTalk: Generational Differences Exist, Attention to the Basics Is Lesson Learned

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As we shared Sunday brunch with the folks (by now, properly called grandparents), the conversation came around to cattle.

"The beef industry is really on the good side of the equation right now," I said to Dad, hoping it would spark some words of wisdom. "That's right, son, but staying there is another matter," he responded in his usual succinct style.

"Dad, did you ever wonder what managerial decision could lock in everything that you needed to be successful?" I asked, almost rhetorically.

For beef cattle producers, that is the dilemma we all face. Every operation has to ask that question and hope the answer is forthcoming. Generally, the answer remains evasive but it is important to ask the question. (I suspect Dad knows the answer, but he's not talking.)

At the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center, such questions are the essence of our existence. Should we focus attention on lowering cow production costs or increasing the value of the product sold (the calf, cull cow, slaughter bulls or bred stock)? The obvious answer is to continuously evaluate both sides of the equation.

This kind of response, however, is easier said than accomplished. Understanding the tools currently available to producers is as challenging as developing new tools.

Last week, I talked about calving death loss at the center. This year has the potential of being one of our worst calving years, while other producers say this has been a relatively good year with very few losses. Thus the problem is even worse when there are few comrades to share in your sorrow.

"What worked and what didn't work?" Dad asked. "Too often we change because it worked for somebody else. But ask yourself, will it be good in your management style and in your operation?"

Over the years (going back to grandparents and great grandparents), when a producer has bad luck, the reaction is to initiate a quest for a most certain ogre that can be eliminated with an appropriate injection from the local veterinarian. Often that injection is the solution. But just as often the ogre is never really found, leaving the producer to wonder about long- and short-range ramifications.

Those same concerns were around when Dad chose agricultural production as his career in life.

A look at the 1948 "Farmer's Handbook," published by the University of Oklahoma Press when Mom and Dad were dating, prescribed nature's tonics, exercise, sunshine, pure air, abundance of fresh water and a variety of feeds for preventing most beef production problems.

"That worked for us then, and it should work now," Dad said.

History has shown that, despite our reluctance to accept these simple remedies, once given a good dose of each, the problem seldom occurs again. "And if the problem does repeat itself," Dad interjected, "a second dose will surely fix all."

"The lab reports indicated that additional tests would be needed to isolate the bacterial agent involved," I responded with my best scientific voice and look.

"Son, could you please pass the butter?" dad responded, holding the bread in his hand as we enjoyed the moment and the discussion. And then he peered over the top of his glasses, "Just know where you have been and where you are going--and be careful along the way. That will eliminate a lot of situations that can create problems," he concluded.

As we parted company, I realized the answer to the future has nothing to do with the cattle cycle, but rather ... Well, I will let you figure it out. And in the process, enjoy a Sunday brunch with family or friends as all of us in the beef business work to stay on the correct side of the equation.

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 BT0042.

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“KEEPING THE CALF HEALTHY:
Provide Nature’s tonics — exercise,
sunshine, pure air, abundance of
fresh water, and a variety of feeds.”

— By John White, 1948 Farmers Handbook

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