



Stocker cooperators change

My cassette tape of collected cowboy songs begins with Ed Bruce singing, “This is *The Last Cowboy Song*, the end of a 100-year waltz; the voices sound sad as they’re singing along, another piece of America lost.”

And since I don’t believe that, my tape continues with Chris LeDoux: “Now don’t you try to tell me the West is dead and gone . . . maybe it ain’t quite the way it was, once upon a time—the West might be changing, but it’s still *Too Tough to Die*.”

We can talk about the “West” or “cowboys,” but the common thread is the cattle business. You don’t see many trail drives up the Goodnight-Loving these days, and yes, the business is changing. But if you put an ear to the ground once in a while, you can change with it and ensure a future where the right kind of cattle still pay their way.

Perhaps no single segment of the beef industry is changing more than the stocker business. For more than that 100-year waltz, good traders could round up some lightweight calves of just about any description, run them right and sell them at a profit. On the average, the next buyer did all right.

From the Texas Panhandle to southern Kansas especially, wheat stocker operators filled a valuable niche, and they still do. East of that belt the Osage and Flint Hills produced such high quality summer grass that many land owners thought it a shame to waste on cows. Especially when cows could make a living on other range where weanlings could barely maintain bodyweight.

The stocker business boomed, partly because one calf was supposed to be much like the next, but good management and timing made for volume and uniformity off grass. The practice of buying very light calves early, heavier as grass turned green, satisfied the growing feedlot demand for big put-together pens. It looked like a simple game, but if you checked under the Stetson of the most successful operators, you'd find names and sources of the best calves by region and ranch.

An influx of many different breeds brought the mixed blessing of an occasional set of crossbred feeders that would gain like gangbusters, but the average became less predictable. So the sources written on hatbands moved to Rolodexes and then to Palm Pilots. A niche would grow for those who bought leftovers and improved their uniformity, and another for those who found sources of calves that would grow, and gain, and grade.

So what's changing? Today, more and more of those stockers are part of a cooperative supply chain with known source and feedlot destination. Stocker operators still take risks, but they are more likely to share those with owners in other segments. That means shared decisions, and less backgrounding on maintenance rations that could compromise later grading ability.

Buyers say it is harder to find truckloads of 300- to 350-pound calves because cow-calf producers recognize they can make more money by producing a heavier calf and retaining ownership longer. As more producers add value through genetics and coordinated health programs and move calves directly to feedlots, there are fewer calves on the open market, and their potential is suspect.

Some stocker operators are making deals for summer-born but high-quality Northern calves. Others are shifting resources to higher-end commercial cows of their

own to produce predictable stockers. They even form alliances with seedstock producers and feedlots to fill orders for thousands of customer calves with known genetics to graze intensive 75-day seasons.

Feedlots continue to build more pens, despite a declining cattle inventory, and average weaning weights still trend higher. The percentage of calves skipping the stocker phase keeps climbing—though many feedlots put the lighter end of these out on stocker partnerships. As the rewards for cooperation continue to grow, the working cowboy will always have a job to do and industry research to help him do it better. But he won't be able to do that job living in the past.

In next month's edition of *Black Ink*, we'll look at what you can afford to pay for bulls. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717.

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