



Herd in the balance

By Steve Suther

Most beef producers are conservative. Politics aside, we're talking about cowherd management. If you had to pick a word to describe your ideal, it would be balance.

But can you have too much balance? We might as well ask if you can have too much common sense, love or justice. Still, a lot depends on interpretation. Balance does not mean always staying in the middle of the road when confronted with a range of options.

On the balance beam, sometimes you need to lean toward the left or right to stay the course and move ahead.

You don't pick a balanced bushel of good and bad apples, or find an ethical average between good and evil. Balance at a low level may be no better than that basket of mixed apples. The scales balance at zero, but where's the beef?

Success in the cattle business takes a balance of risk and reward, leading and following, planning and action. Though you seek advice, you think for yourself, taking that advice and all the evidence into account.

Balance is truly an ideal in genetic selection, but where does it start and end? Some producers only consider one or two traits, balancing on an inverted scale the expected progeny differences (EPDs) for birth weight against that for weaning weight. Others look at a range of several EPDs, perhaps even including carcass traits.

Typically, the highest value bull is seen as the one that does it all, balanced in the top quartile EPDs across the board. That may not be the most valuable bull for your herd right now.

Think about that herd. Do you know if they are the product of balanced genetics? If so, then you need that balanced bull. In most cases, however, they are not perfectly balanced. They may produce a diverse calf crop from a balanced bull.

To achieve balance in your herd genetics, you must manage the calves to meet their potential, measure performance, keep records and sort the data. Think about the next links in the production chain and look for ways to measure feedlot and carcass values as well.

When you sort out the data and compare to ideal, you'll probably see a few "holes." Armed with that picture, you can find bulls that complete the balance in your herd, although they do not carry balanced genetics.

Some larger operations may have enough cattle and resources to sort and custom breed certain cows to the bulls they need. More producers can do that using artificial insemination (AI). But at the least, you can buy bulls that fill a gap that shows up in most of your cows.

For example, if you find that most of your calves do not gain efficiently or achieve premium quality grades, you can select bulls that stand out for both marbling and feed efficiency. You'll want to maintain reasonably high standards and balance among the other traits as well.

You can achieve balance more quickly through strategic culling and selection on the female side as well. When you get there, it's time to buy those ideal, balanced-trait bulls that produce more than just pounds or higher marbling.

In the big picture, balance takes more than genetics of course. It takes management of those genetics to produce the best beef you profitably can. Analyze potential return on every investment, but don't cut costs beyond the quality tipping point. Look to the past as well as the future, and live in the balance of today.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Miranda Reiman will remind us that you get what you pay for. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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