



The “C” word

By Steve Suther

Words mean more than what’s in the dictionary. Some can be rhetorical devices loaded with positive or negative undertones. Consider “chase” and all its forms.

A dictionary says the verb means to pursue in order to overtake or capture; to persistently seek the favor of; or, just the opposite, to drive away. The derisive derivative most common in the cattle industry comes from the centuries-old noun phrase, “wild goose chase.” That is, “an absurd search for something nonexistent or unobtainable; any senseless pursuit of an object or end.”

In broader society, we criticize opportunistic lawyers as ambulance chasers. Politicians chase votes. Stock traders chase profits. Detectives chase down a lead but worry about chasing shadows and ghosts. Storm trackers chase tornadoes. Fools chase the sun, clouds and rainbows.

Poor business practices chase employees and customers away. Undisciplined dogs chase cars, cats, rabbits, squirrels, butterflies and their own tails.

It’s usually better to lead than chase cattle, but one calorie-counting authority estimates a moderate walk in non-strenuous cattle chasing burns 238 calories per hour for a 150-pound person. At that rate, it would take more than three hours to walk off a Big Mac.

You may be thinking of another idiom: cut to the chase, or get to the point.

Some beef industry pundits proclaim ideal pathways for all logical producers. Dissenters are deluded and must be “chasing” something.

You can sense the judgment and condemnation in the cliché warning, “don’t chase single-trait selection.” It’s such an obvious no-no that the only surprise is that we keep seeing the warning. There is usually an agenda, such as to imply that if you so much as *include* some popular trait, you are off on a rabbit trail. If you know the phrase at all, you know it’s like saying, “don’t chase your tail.”

Some intense cattlemen lash out with the “c” word. They may include their goals and aspirations, which never include so much as a stray glance at what they own as a senseless pursuit.

However, those who see things differently are condescendingly lamented as chasing an illusive and impractical dream.

The most chased-after end seems to be genetic selection that would add value to the beef we sell to consumers. One might as well chase ping-pong balls or a cure for cancer. Critics include the range of those who see any attention to post-weaning traits as silly, to those who see it as a noble, if impossible dream.

When the rhetoric starts flying, a critic may deplore “chasing” something or other. He will usually balance that by pointing out the further errors of “ignoring” and “sacrificing” other things. The implication is that those slighted pursuits are at least as worthy as that being chased after, but the chaser is too blind to see.

It all boils down to bias in the critic. Look at their cattle, their field of study, perhaps their life’s work. They may not realize their bias or the condescending nature of their chase to enlighten others. Or, they could be using loaded words in a calculated manner to sell something.

Discussions that give rise to accusations of chase often deal with the idea that breeds have certain rigid roles in the cattle industry. No breed should evolve to something other than its textbook description. Producers of any supposed maternal breed had better not chase those traits that have been defined somewhere as better provided by terminal breeds. Those who are supposed to be raising terminal cattle may improve maternal traits only at the risk of such criticism.

Evolution in response to the market leads to convergence of type, which confounds the crossbreeding strategy of breed complementarity. Those who see crossbreeding as the only logical choice may want to keep breed differences as static as they were in the research that supports their programs.

To say anyone, any group or an entire industry is chasing something is to insult their individual or collective intelligence. Although the shoe sometimes fits, it is hardly constructive to call them on it. Maybe you have superior knowledge. Maybe you are off chasing squirrels while barking at the hounds on point.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Miranda Reiman will look at the role of consultants and advisors. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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