



## *Manage to win*

If you care about your reputation as a calf supplier, you have to care about how they work for the next segment or link in the beef chain. Genetics can make a big difference in feedlot and carcass value potential, but management and environment can be up to five times more important.

Some cattle can't make the premium quality grades, but most can grade USDA Choice if you set them up for it. Marbling, the taste fat in beef and chief factor in quality grade, can develop early in a calf's life if we let it. Unfortunately, at several stages of production, some calves are set up to fall short of their grading potential.

Consider calf nutrition. Do you keep a balance mineral mix in front of the cows? Can the calves manage to get everything they need from milk? Later in the season, are they trying to graze low quality forage to fill up after nursing leaves them still hungry?

Creep feeding is a viable option with many postweaning benefits. In the past, producers worried that creep-fed calves would look too fat in the auction ring. If you are producing the kind of short-frame cattle that were common 30 to 40 years ago, that's is a valid concern. However, you should blame the genetics more than the creep.

Many of today's beef calves cope well with grain-based creep, and it starts them on the road to quality. Buyers know such calves are set up to succeed in the feedlot.

If you manage to get calves started on grain creep soon enough, research shows 100 days of it can increase final grade by a full marbling score. Calves that know what grain is are much less likely to get sick later in a feedlot, and they gain just as rapidly as their underfed mates.

Consider calf health. Did you manage to keep scours away this year? Vaccinating cows and moving new pairs to fresh pasture will help. Did you castrate the bull calves before two months of age? Research shows an effect a year later when early-cut steers are more likely to achieve premium quality. Vaccinations at branding to guard against blackleg, pinkeye and bovine respiratory disease (BRD) also help keep worry away from your herd.

Will you manage to roundup the calves for preweaning vaccinations, especially against BRD? More and more successful ranchers list such preconditioning shots as a key to healthy calves at weaning.

When will you wean? From the eastern Corn Belt to the High Plains, producers of every size and scale have tried weaning at 100 days. Most of them will never go back because of the health benefits for calves, quality grade advantage for calves and feed-cost savings for the ranch.

Some cow-calf producers manage to read the year and their resources to determine an ideal weaning date, and it may vary by two months from year to year. It can pay to be flexible.

If you are not aiming for a natural program, maybe you implant calves at weaning. Maybe you shouldn't. You lose, the calf loses, the next owner loses and the consumer loses when implants are used incorrectly or with poor timing. Growth stimulants are supposed to make more muscle, but they can't make it out of nothing. Newly weaned calves can't manage to eat enough in their first two weeks to justify the implant.

If you are working them up to full feed, you may be able to justify an implant, but don't rush it. Research that followed calves through harvest found some pens had 50% more Choice grades when implanting was delayed a couple of weeks. Some producers wait to give BRD booster shots and catch individual weights at that time, too.

If you manage for quality, work with a cattle feeder who won't undo everything you did right. No feedlot can salvage full grading potential from mismanaged cattle, but some manage with an indifference to grading potential that borders on mismanagement.

Gain, feed conversion and pounds are often the most important measures of profit in the feedlot. But with quality-focused calves, you can get all that plus value-based grid premiums. Working together, feeders and ranchers learn they don't have to choose between growth and grade.

Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll consider fencing. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail [steve@certifiedangusbeef.com](mailto:steve@certifiedangusbeef.com).

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