



Close, but no premium?

The blink of an eye separates winners from losers. A couple of feet and a thousandth of a second may send one driver around for a victory lap, while others cruise into their pits to analyze why they fell short.

Little things make a big difference. Thomas Dewey and Al Gore would have been presidents of the United States if a few more of their supporters had voted in a few precincts. As Ben Franklin wrote some 250 years ago, “For want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe, the horse was lost; for want of a horse, the rider was lost.” And on it goes, building greater significance to that missing nail.

What details are you overlooking right now?

The “slight edge” philosophy has often been quoted in marketing seminars. You can turn your life around by taking baby steps, improving something just a little bit every day. The underlying truth is constant change. Things will either get a little better or a little worse over time, and it takes action to sway that in your favor.

Some things slowly accumulate to a critical point, like rust on baling wire, until one more bump by one more calf after one more micron of rust.

Good things accumulate, too, and sometimes very quickly. It may only take a thousandth of a second for enough reflected light from an image to fix itself on film or a digital sensor.

We usually have both good and bad qualities accumulating at different rates. The trick is to minimize the bad or hold it at bay until you get all the good possible. Many games, from computer and video to team sports, apply these concepts. In basketball and football, you want to score more points without too many fouls or penalties. There’s usually a scoreboard and clock, so you know where you stand at a glance.

Cattle feeding takes the same kind of balance, trying to feed well and long enough to maximize their marbling score to win premiums, without accumulating too much external fat and those \$15 penalties.

The USDA official graders don't wear stripes but they do make the calls. Marbling scores add up to the quality grades, with a score of 500 equal to low Choice. Sometimes just a thousandth of the marbling scale can mean the difference between Choice and Select, or higher premiums.

Falling short of that line can mean losing a premium of \$150 or more. A recent industry survey showed about one-eighth of all graded beef had marbling scores near the line. If half of your cattle finished just on the wrong side of the line, it could feel like losing the ballgame.

And don't forget the external fat accumulating to the point where discounts put profit on the bench. To avoid "foul trouble," feeders may sell finished cattle as soon as they reach 0.4 inches of fat. But on some types of cattle, that could be like failing to engage. A team whistled for almost no fouls or penalties might be less perfect than lazy. Many English cattle don't get the chance to play if they don't get to half an inch of outside fat.

One big difference between the cattle business and spectator sports is the lack of a live scoreboard and clock for cattle feeding. In fact, the refs call marbling scores and measure back fat after the game is over.

The cattle business is always in overtime, looking for the slight edge that brings home the profit victory. You can make plans for putting on 2 pounds of gain per day, but you won't know how you're doing unless you take starting and midpoint weights.

As you try to improve genetics in your herd, expected progeny differences (EPDs) provide tools to gain the slight edge. Considering all the cattle on the line for millions of dollars in premiums, it becomes clear that there's a big difference between a bull that is merely positive for marbling and rib eye, and one that is in the upper 10% of a breed database.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Miranda Reiman will look at making the most out of culling. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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