



Win one for the consumer

Maybe your cowherd is like a football team in need of some rebuilding years, lacking in discipline and focus. That's the kind of thing you might notice in a fall roundup.

Still struggling to find its identity, the herd takes to the field in a hurry-up offense. You have to respect their quickness when the lead cow begins to audibilize. She calls her own number and tries to establish the running game.

A blitz is out of the question because you can't stop her; you can only hope to contain her and stop the big play. But it looks like blown coverage. She cuts back against the grain and rumbles down the sideline till she runs out of real estate. Finally turned back, the herd huddles.

You want to stick to the game plan, but you can see the frustration starting to set in amongst your crew, tired of playing defense. That last incident looked like a busted play.

As the coach, you always give 110%, but you're under fire until you get the herd headed in the right direction, and not just at roundup. You'd like to think they're better than the record indicates, but then you realize the record is all that counts. You will have to trade that quarterback cow and draft some young blood to fill the gaps.

Some individuals have a lot of depth, and they do things out there that don't show up in the statistics, but you're missing a few pieces to the puzzle. Strategic selection can change the chemistry into a cohesive unit that will finally get the respect it deserves.

Like football, beef production is played out on a grid, and it can be a game of inches, even fractions. A hundredth of a subjective marbling score can decide discount or premium. And you

know the agony of defeat when harvest data shows an animal was called Yield Grade (YG) 4 — another tenth of an inch of ribeye would have avoided the penalty.

Timeout for measurement. Analyze the replay and see if it was genetics, a feeding error or a simple miscommunication. Did most of the herd score premiums?

You might have star players, but management won't be as impressed with the Prime YG 2 when there's also the Standard YG 4. You have to keep books to find high-maintenance players that take more resources than they are worth and need to be traded. And of course, you have to take note of players that are past their prime or need an attitude adjustment.

Your herd is a franchise, a kind of brand with its own reputation that you can build up. First, you have to know the score, and what the score means. Then you can use the tools available to make genetic, health, nutrition and management changes.

The beef industry has its own clichés and jargon without borrowing more from football. The prize bull now is a balanced-trait curve bender that does it all. You avoid chasing single trait selection like the pros pass over a pocket passer. But don't buy without studying the bull's expected progeny differences (EPDs), or you might end up with one that looks better than he plays.

You may be the herd owner, with the ability to go out and get what the herd needs; or like a small-town high school coach, you may have to make the best of what you have. Do you get to call the plays, or are they handed down from above? Focused management, like good coaching, can make champions out of ordinary individuals.

Teamwork wins championships, and it can keep beef on the center of the plate. You can work together with other members of the team—seedstock, commercial, feedlot and packer—to win consumer demand from the competing proteins on the market's playing field. There's a new game every time a consumer makes a choice.

Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll look at breaking even. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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