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Settling for par?

By Nicole Lane Erceg

To some, it looks like insanity — chasing a tiny white ball around attempting to hit it into a hole only slightly bigger. For me, it's a passion. I love playing golf. Unfortunately, I'm not great at it. It's not that I don't have good equipment or the right genetics (my father golfed competitively at the collegiate level). I'm a leisurely player. I have not invested in lessons or spent hours on the driving range. Most of my time spent on the course is for pure entertainment.

Golf pays off for those who devote themselves to competing at a high level. Winning a major championship as a professional can bring home \$1 million or more in just one weekend. And that's before sponsorship endorsements. Fortunately, reaching elite status in the cattle business is not quite as exclusive a feat as professional sports. Though I've never known returns on investment in the cattle business to be quite so lucrative, there is a definite gap in the payout for higher quality cattle compared to those that must simply take market price.

With the right genetics, management and some cooperation from Mother Nature, almost anyone can reach a level of high performance. It takes a dedication to learning the business, making good decisions and getting better every year. It's a formula that can be replicated across different environments, by different people in different business models.

Scoring in the cattle business and golf might be considered direct opposites: less is more in golf, but more is better with cattle. Yet, in both endeavors, there's something that sets the elite apart from the all right.

Recently, I spoke with a cattleman who decided many years ago to transition his farm operation to focus on his cattle. Until that point, the livestock had been a sideline hobby to his business, something he enjoyed, but gave little attention to how they performed beyond the front gate. His transition included buying better genetics, a focus on carcass performance and tracking herd data to improve his aim. Now his calves achieve at a completely new level for both his bottom line and the end consumer.

It was all a change in mindset — shifting the cattle from a thing where he leisurely went through the motions, to an expectation that his calves would perform at the top when it matters.

“There’s a place for commodity cattle,” he told me. “But there’s a place for upper-end cattle, too, and we’d rather be on the premium end than the commodity.”

At the golf course, there will always be a spot for players like me. Lots of people can mark a card that’s close to par. In the grocery store, there may be a place for mediocre beef, but that space is shrinking. Chicken and pork can deliver a similar eating experience for a better value. Consumers prefer higher quality beef, and it’s the good stuff that keeps them coming back for more.

Are you producing elite cattle, or is your scorecard par for the course? Today, industry average is better than it’s ever been. What was once considered the ideal, 70% Choice for U.S. fed cattle, is now below average or “par.” In this business, the prize money comes from higher marbling scores.

Average is nothing special; half are below that midpoint and half above. Which side your cattle are on is mostly up to you.

Next time in *Black Ink*[®] Miranda Reiman considers easy come, easy go. Questions? E-mail nerceg@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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