

# Udderly Beautiful

*Nevada livestock specialist shares how to recognize the desirable, as well as the faulty, udder.*

Story by  
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Certainly one of the most important functional traits is udder and teat quality. Anyone who has ever attempted to milk out a sore balloon-teated cow can certainly relate to the need for quality udders.

Udder and teat soundness is a concern for a number of reasons, including:

- 1) labor associated with extra costs and reduced convenience;
- 2) longevity, which may be reduced because of injury or mastitis;
- 3) calf performance, which can be affected by a reduction in milk flow or lower colostrum intake by newborn calves that have difficulty nursing oversized teats; and
- 4) most udder and teat characteristics appear to be heritable.

That last point means that there definitely is variation in the udder quality of daughters from different sire groups. Thus, change can be made through selection.

## Characteristics

It is vital to be able to recognize the desirable, as well as the faulty, udder.

An ideal udder is snugly attached, symmetrical and of moderate length. The quarters should be evenly balanced, with the teats of medium size and length.

The teats should be placed squarely under each quarter. A side view of the udder should show a level udder floor without any quartering.

The median suspensory ligament is the center support that ties the udder to the cow's body wall. This is the indentation or cleft you see when you view a cow's udder from the rear.

A strong median suspensory ligament is essential to a satisfactory mammary system. A cow that does not have a strong center support is subject to several serious udder problems:

- The udder floor may drop, which causes the udder attachments to weaken.
- Once the udder floor has dropped, the teats will begin to strut outward on the

sides of the udder. This makes them much more liable to be injured.

- Once the udder floor has dropped, the entire mammary system may deepen to the point the cow's calf can't nurse.

The foreudder should be of moderate length, strongly attached, with teats of moderate size and length. A foreudder that's too long may break away from the body wall as the cow gets older. Also, extra long foreudders are frequently "meaty," which is an indication of low milk production.

The rear udder should be attached high to the body, with moderate width. It needs to show the defined halving described for the median suspensory ligament.

Quality and texture of a cow's udder are also important things for you to consider. Texture can best be described as a sponge-like consistency that allows a cow to let down her milk rapidly once she's stimulated. Ideal quality means that her udder is soft and pliable, free from congestion and hardness.

## A practical udder-scoring system

The following udder-scoring system was devised by Mike and Barb Wheeling, who operate a commercial ranch near Sidney, Mont. They took photographs of their cows at calving and developed categories (scores 1 to 5) that required various levels of human intervention. The best score is 5, but it is only superior to a 4 because of pigmentation, which is a major advantage in preventing sunburned udders in snow country.

Fig. 1 shows the appearances (A, B, C and D) placed in scores 1 through 5 within the udder-scoring system.

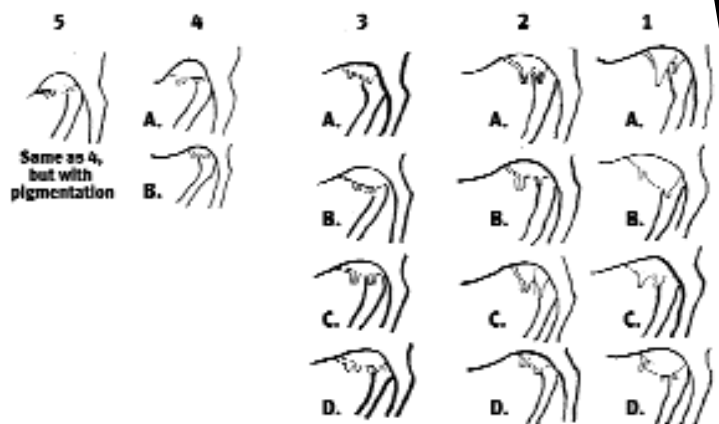
A 4 or 5 requires no intervention, whereas a 1 will definitely require intervention to avoid a spoiled quarter or mastitis or to allow the newborn to nurse. A 3 may not be pretty to look at, but it will generally not require any intervention. A 2 may require intervention and, if found in a young cow, will surely worsen by next year.

The 1s are definite culls, and their daughters should be avoided as replacements. The 2s are culls as economic conditions allow. Preference is given to daughters of 5s and 4s for replacements.

Most commercial cows in the United States would be score 3, depending on breed and age.

Other scoring systems are available and in use by the various breed associations; however, this system can be universally applied.

**Fig. 1: Udder teat score system**



### **Common questions answered**

*Do I consider the age of the cow?* Udder quality will usually decline with age; however, age should not be considered when scoring udders. It is best to score the udders as they are, regardless of the age of the cow.

*What's more important, teat circumference or teat length?* In general, teat circumference will cause problems much more often than teat length. Short teats are preferred, but long teats normally do not create difficulty for a calf provided the circumference is not excessively large. Since the largest

teat is most likely to create a problem, evaluate the udder based on the largest teat.

*How do udder scores relate to milk production?* Teats and udders should be scored without regard for the cow's milk production. The scoring system is intended solely for evaluating udder and teat soundness. Calf weaning weights are the best estimates of milk production.

*When is the best time to score cows?* The best time to score cows is within 24 hours after calving. If the cow is going to have problems with udder quality, it typically

will show up when she first freshens. If you wait until the cow's udder is nursed out, teat size in particular can't be accurately scored.



**Editor's Note:** Portions of this article were reprinted with permission from the American Gelbvieh Association, American Hereford Association and the American Simmental Association fact sheets.