

Lessons Learned, Premiums Earned

Cattlemen work together to turn a bad experience into a long-term win-win partnership.

Story by
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The calves should have made a buyer sit up and take notice. The 750-pound (lb.) Angus-sired steers came from five herds that had been selected for performance and quality for generations. In the summer of '99, they had been weaned, vaccinated and preconditioned to meet the Southeastern Pride Blue Tag requirements, as well as the Smoky Mountain Feeder Calf Association guidelines.

The producers brought the calves to the East Tennessee Livestock Center early on Friday morning, Sept. 10. With help from Bob Sliger, Monroe County, Tenn., Extension agent, and Jennifer and Mark Houston, who manage the Sweetwater sales facility, the producers hand-picked and sorted the calves to make a uniform, top-notch truckload lot.

"They were the same genetics; they had been on the same feeding program; and they had the same health products," Jennifer Houston says. "They were as good as any cattle in the sale."

"We wanted those calves to be special," Sliger says.

The buyer, Mike Briggs, did take notice. Unfortunately, it was because the calves broke with respiratory illnesses three days after they arrived at his Seward, Neb., feedyard. Four of those handpicked calves died.

The picture didn't get any prettier. "They never did recover as far as performance, and they did not grade well at all," Briggs says. "They are one of the few sets of cattle I lost money on last year."

"When they don't grade, we produce a poor product and try to shove it off on the consumer. That is not a good deal," he adds.

"It stirred up a hornet's nest," says



Morgan Jones, Sweetwater, Tenn., says his calves left his farm on a Friday morning but didn't get to Nebraska until Monday night. [PHOTOS BY BECKY MILLS]

Sweetwater, Tenn., producer Morgan Jones.

Briggs could have taken his business elsewhere. But, he says, "I felt like there was an awful lot of potential there." Not only for his feedyard, but also for Nebraska Corn-Fed Beef™ (NCFB), a quality-focused, branded beef program, of which he is president of the board of directors.

Sandra Milton, executive director of NCFB, agrees. "We were glad to get the calves. They are filling in gaps that help us with a year-round supply."

Briggs quickly spotted another key factor in the calves' favor, or more specifically, in their producers'. "Their attitude was, what can we do to fix this — to make it better?"

Milton and Briggs responded by heading to Tennessee to work with the producers.

Pinning down the problem

When they started piecing together

the list of things that had gone wrong, however, there were factors the producers couldn't control. No. 1, the calves stayed at the sale barn for two days, then had delays en route.

"Those calves left my place on Friday morning and didn't get to Nebraska until Monday night," Jones says.

Even though the Houstons kept the cattle watered and fed, the extended stay at the sales facility did not help.

"The other people who got the cattle out of here didn't have any problems with them," Jennifer says.

To let the cattle recuperate from the stress of the extended holding time and trip, Briggs put them in a pen to let them rest before he processed them. When he bought the cattle through an order buyer, he was told the cattle had received a four-way viral vaccine. He assumed they had been vaccinated with a four-way modified-live-virus (MLV) vaccine. Instead, they had received a killed product.

To put the odds on the calves' side, Briggs prescribed Pfizer's One Shot, a pasteurized vaccine, and a four-way viral vaccination for future loads. "If they don't use a modified-live vaccine, I told them they had to use Pfizer's CattleMaster® 4," Briggs says.

CattleMaster 4 is a combination of a killed product for bovine viral diarrhea (BVD), a chemically altered MLV vaccine for protection against infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR) and parainfluenza-3 virus (PI₃), and an MLV vaccine protect-



East Tennessee Livestock Center, Sweetwater, Tenn., is home to Smoky Mountain Feeder Calf Association sales.

ing against bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV). It is safe to use on calves nursing pregnant cows.

While the MLV vs. killed vaccine debate is an ongoing one, University of Georgia (UGA) veterinarian Mel Pence says there is one hard and fast rule: The customer is always right.

"If the customer is a feeder, and he wants to buy calves vaccinated with MLV, then the calves should be vaccinated with MLV," Pence says. But he adds, "There were probably a lot of factors involved in the calves' getting sick."

Still, the veterinarian says MLV usually produces both a higher level of immunity and longer-lasting immunity. On the downside, he says MLV usually is more stressful for the cattle.

Killed vaccines have the reputation of being safer, particularly if the cattle being vaccinated have access to pregnant cows.

High standards

Aside from the changes in the vaccination protocol, Briggs wanted the Tennessee cattle to be eligible for the NCFB program, which meant the producers had to be certified under Nebraska's Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) requirements. Under the leadership of the Tennessee Cattlemen's Association (TCA) and Tennessee Extension beef specialist Clyde Lane, TCA updated and revamped its BQA requirements to meet Nebraska's program.

Many state BQA programs recommend that injections be given ahead of the shoulder, but it is not a requirement. Nebraska, which has a reputation as having one of the strictest BQA programs in the country, requires all shots be given that way.

To get the message across, TCA trained 120 workers to teach BQA workshops, then trained and certified 700 pro-



Doug Watts, Englewood, Tenn., says members of the association take buyers' complaints to heart.

ducers to meet the updated BQA requirements.

"That is triple what we anticipated," says Beth Barber, TCA executive aide.

In addition, the Nebraska BQA stipulations require that any treatments or vaccinations be recorded as to when, what and how.

Milton says they are still working on getting those records from the producer to the feeder.

"It has been frustrating trying to work with the order buyers," she comments. "They are concerned the feeders are going to cut them out. The feeders here don't have time to travel to the Southeast to buy their own cattle. They rely on the order buyers to find cattle that are qualified for the program. I think we are starting to make some progress in that area."

Identification

In the meantime, the Houstons were working on communications, too. "We've been looking at electronic identification (EID) tags for a couple of years," Mark explains.

Luckily, they are friends with Texan Ken Jordan, who pioneered the use of EID tags in auction markets. Jordan was interested in the way the Houstons conducted their graded feeder-calf sales, so they swapped ideas.

As a result, when the 40-year-old Smoky Mountain Feeder Calf Association conducted its September 2000 sale, it was the first EID-featured sale in the Southeast.

"We now have a lot more options than the old paper trail," Mark says.

The Sept. 8 sale also proved Briggs was right about the attitudes of the Tennessee producers. That night, 795 calves went through the ring with EID tags. Most came from producers using the same vaccines prescribed by Briggs, and most were from the herds of BQA-certified producers.

"We talked to the feeders and heard their complaints, then brought those complaints back home to try to remedy the situation," says Doug Watts, an Englewood, Tenn., producer.

"We want to produce the kind of calves that will go out and work for those folks," Sliger emphasizes.

A payoff

Thankfully, the right way also was the profitable way. After comparing their sale



Bob Sliger, Monroe County Extension agent, says members of the Smoky Mountain Feeder Calf Association want to produce calves that will work for buyers.



Jennifer and Mark Houston, East Tennessee Livestock Center, helped the association conduct its first electronic-identification sale.

with other graded feeder-calf sales on the same day in the same area, Mark says, "Ours was the highest. We were real satisfied with the premiums." He estimates they averaged \$4-\$8/hundredweight (cwt.) more.

Then, as the final stamp of approval, there was the buyer list.

Jennifer says, "Mr. Briggs bought five loads this year and paid good money for them."

Of those five loads, one calf has died at Briggs Feedyard — from a broken neck suffered when he stuck his head through the corral pipes.

"That is outstanding," Briggs says of the calves' health status. "We have gotten along much, much, much better this year."