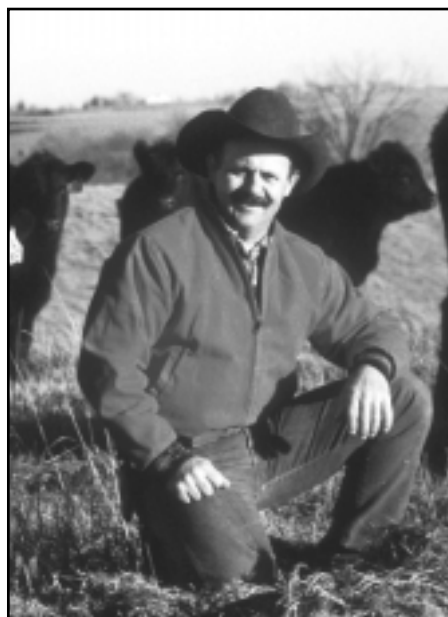




About 500 acres of the Werners' Ringgold County farm is in hay, ground from which they put up and market nearly 15,000 small square bales of high-quality hay each year. About half of the pastureland is fescue with a portion in brome and orchardgrass and improved with some red clover, legumes and alfalfa mixes.

Worry-Free Weaning

Greater efficiency and healthier calves have made the Werners believers in early weaning on pasture.



Besides taking the worry out of weaning, early weaning on pasture has helped Jim Werner and his wife, Ann, produce better-quality cattle more efficiently.

Story & photos by
ROD FEE

What started out as just an experiment has become routine weaning procedure for Jim and Ann Werner on their Diagonal, Iowa, ranch. In effect, they've taken the worry out of weaning.

The Werners — along with sons Clint and Joe, daughters Becky and Bonnie and their sons-in-law — calve out about 300 head of registered Angus cows a year. They do this on about 2,000 acres of owned and rented pastures in south central Iowa.

For four years now, the Werners have managed an early pasture-weaning program for both spring- and fall-calving cows.

"The first year we tried to pasture-wean young calves, I was sure we would have problems," Jim says. "But strangely enough, it worked so slick, we'd not think of going back."

Skeptical the first year, they tried the

early-weaning program with only 50 calves. The calves weaned easily and stayed clean and healthy, with no dust or mud to combat. They never seemed to miss a lick, Jim explains. "We wouldn't think of going back to weaning later and in lots. While we've not tried it, I even think that if the cattle were accustomed to electric fencing we could get by weaning in pastures with a double strand of electric wire."

The Werners believe the biggest stress on calves at weaning time is not separation from the mothers, but moving the calves into a new environment.

"We noticed that later on, long after the calves were weaned and the calves were moved back to lots for winter feeding, that the calves would bawl for a couple of days, similar to the reaction we used to see with weaning," Ann says. "Seeing how quietly they weaned in their original environment was a real eye opener for us. It was just one less stress to the social environment of the calves. You about have to see the difference to believe it."

How the program works

Calving of the 250 spring-calving cows usually starts the third week in March and runs for about 60 days. All the cows are bred by artificial insemination (AI) for one round then divided into pastures with appropriate cleanup bulls based on pedigree and expected progeny differences (EPDs) for another 40 days. Weaning usually occurs on or about Labor Day.

"By that time the calves will range in age from about 100 to 160 days," Jim says, "and for the last couple of years the average age of the calves is about 130 days."

Most of the calves at this point are weighing in the low 400-pound (lb.) range, but a few of the older calves in the group might reach 600 lb. At that point, the calves are given their first round of shots, in accordance with the green-tag program, weighed, tattooed and weaned.

"We may commingle as many as 10 pastures of calves, but find we have our best luck weaning them on pasture," Jim says. "We may keep the weaned cows in adjacent pastures, but we try to have a well-rested pasture where we run the calves. By this, we mean pastures that have been rested for a minimum of 45 to 60 days and have adequate regrowth before we turn in the weaned calves."

The calves are not creep-fed prior to weaning.

The fall calves

The Werners also believe in early weaning of fall-calving cows. These cows start calving in September to a 50-day breeding season. The calves of these fall cows may be

pulled even earlier, at about 110 days, depending on the weather.

"We have little trouble pulling these calves if they are at least 90 days old," Jim says. "On the fall-calving cows, often the weather conditions dictate whether or not we pull the calves early. It's more difficult sometimes to pull these and leave them on pasture because of water problems and the sometimes extremely inclement weather we have. But most times, even in bad weather, both cows and calves seem to do better when weaned."

"Ideally we would like not to commingle the calves when weaning," Jim says. "But by weaning them on pasture versus bunching them in the lot, the calves seem to spread out into their normal social order, and we have had very little problem with respiratory diseases." Should a respiratory problem crop up, the Werners add about 4 grams/head/day of an antibiotic to the feed for a short period. A coccidiostat may be added if necessary.

"We have found that if we locate bunks near where the calves have fence-line contact with the weaned cows, this encourages them to start eating," Jim says. "But if the calves have plenty of high-quality legume-grass pasture we seldom see them standing around bawling.

"From about Day 1 they tend to spread out over the pasture and seem much more content grazing," he continues. "Within the first three to four days, the calves probably spend up to 80% of their time spread out in the pastures grazing. We feel that not moving the calves from their known pastures creates the least possible stress on the calves. Moving may indeed create more stress on the calves than pulling them off the cows."

The Werners are trying to work rotational paddock grazing into their program by crossfencing fields with electric fencing rather than rotating whole pastures. Just this past year they enrolled 160 acres in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for a five-year term. This was improved and broken up into eight separate paddocks for grazing. This program allows them access to government funds to help pay for improvements such as fencing, seed, buffer strips and liming.

Bulky, palatable ration

The Werner calves have access to ground, mixed feed from Day 1 on the early pasture-weaning program. Jim combines about 350 lb. of ground corn, 240 lb. of good quality third-cutting alfalfa hay, 300 lb. of stubble hay and 360 lb. of pelleted soybean hulls. This is mixed in a feeder wagon. They add about 600 lb. of water to cut the dust and make the ration more

palatable. This makes about a 13%-14% protein ration.

"If we are working with younger fall calves weaned in inclement weather, we will boost the energy and the protein to about 17%," Jim says. "They won't clean up much of the ration if the adjoining pasture is good, but this gets them started at the bunk."

The calves are left on this ration on pasture until they are brought back in at about 200 days of age, when official 205-day weights are recorded. Bulls gain about 3.6-3.8 lb./day and heifers gain about 2.75 lb./day on the pasture-weaning program. Feed conversion is little more than 4 to 1, so gains are very efficient.

Once sorted into heifer and bull pastures, the weaned calves are stepped up on feed. When they are 7-8 months of age, the heifers are eating up to 16 lb./day of the mixture, and bulls are eating up to 24 lb./day.

The Werners have nearly 12 years of records detailing the performance of the early-weaned calves.

"We find we get equal or better performance on the early-weaned calves than we would leaving them on their mothers," Ann says. "The gains are cheap, and it has drastically cut our cow maintenance costs. We feel like we can add between one and two cow body condition scores (BCS) to our breeding herd going into winter by early weaning."

Since reproductive efficiency and nutrition and cow condition are so closely tied together, the Werners say they believe this has provided a big boost in getting cows rebred on time and decreasing the number of those open at pregnancy-check time.

"We would like to see the Angus Association move to accepting official weaning weights on calves at a younger age," Jim says. "Based on our weights at weaning the last two years, we see a very close correlation between the heaviest calves weaned early and the heaviest calves based on their final 205-day weights. We intend to provide all of the data to the Association in order to help them evaluate it."

Advantages for commercial producers

The Werners say they see a lot of advantages to early pasture weaning for commercial cattlemen.



In addition to cattle, the Werners manage 8-10 registered Quarter Horse mares, which come in handy for working cows.

"Calves definitely stay cleaner and seem to develop better hair coats than if confined in dirt lots," Jim says. "Nothing kills the value of a feeder calf in our area more than muddy calves at an auction."

The Werners point out that calves on pasture can be pushed or left in a green condition at the producer's discretion, providing more options when selling cattle. Should the market jump as quickly as it did early this fall, you can act quickly to get calves to market. This fall we've seen wide swings in feeder-calf prices. Early September saw some excellent prices, then they backed off considerably before recovering again about the middle of November.

"Beyond taking the worry out of weaning," Ann says, "this early weaning on pasture has really helped our total program of producing better quality cattle in a more efficient manner. We're using a lot less stored feed on both cows and calves and it has been a big boost to our bottom line."

