

# Tracking *the* Numbers

*It still takes some luck to get data after you sell calves, but planning can increase your odds.*

Story by

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You need to know how your calves perform in the feedlot and at the packing plant. That's the only way to guide decisions that lead to genetic improvement. But there can be a wide gulf between needing the information and getting it if you sell the calves outright. Whether you sell them through an auction or directly to an order buyer or feedlot, they belong to someone else who may not care to help educate you. Even worse, the buyer may have a vested interest in keeping you in the dark.

Some order buyers won't link sellers with feedlots because they fear being sidestepped the next time around. Some feedlots simply don't want to mess with the whole process. Others hesitate to share data because sellers who find out their cattle are top-performers may demand higher prices.

## Overcoming the hurdles

These obstacles can be overcome, and a growing number of feedlots, services and auctions are making the job easier. A survey of Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlots last spring showed that 90% of them would provide individual data to ranchers who retain no ownership in their calves.

Regardless of who's negotiating for the data — rancher, order buyer or auction service — the process requires a commitment to communication. Angus seedstock producer Blaine Bruner, Drake, N.D., found that out firsthand back in 1995, when he first set out to track the performance and carcass-quality numbers on his cattle.

You don't know if you don't try, but back then, luck had a lot to do with success. The order buyer who bought Bruner's calves did so for a farmer-feeder in the Corn Belt. And when Bruner asked for the feeder's name, the buyer was willing to share it: Jeff Ebel, of Sutherland, Iowa. Bruner called Ebel, who agreed to provide individual feedlot data and to let Bruner know when the cattle would be harvested.

"I was kind of curious about the data, too," Ebel says. "Blaine paid the collection fees, and it wasn't much trouble for us to sort the cattle by ear

tag for marketing," he adds. Bruner hired Cattlemen's Carcass Data Service, a data collection company at West Texas A&M University, to be at the plant on harvest day.

"We fed cattle with [Ebel] for six years after that," Bruner says, "and we got data back each of those years. It cost us \$6 a head to get complete individual data back, and we shared it with the feeder. At the time, we were looking for information to help us decide whether or not to retain ownership." Plans changed and the Bruners began selling more breeding bulls than steers, but the data helped.

**"Added value trickles down the line."**

—John Rule

Bruner found the initial benchmarks of 65% Choice and an average 13.2-square-inch (sq. in.) ribeye on his family's cattle left room for improvement. And improve they did, shifting bulls in 1997 and 1998 to match the sires of those progeny with the largest ribeyes. Proving the ability to make simultaneous progress, Bruner moved the Choice percentage to 86%, while the ribeye average hit 14.5 sq. in. in 2001.

He also learned that getting the information back "really takes a lot of 'PR' work between the producer and the feeder." Ebel, who runs 60 commercial Angus cows and finishes 400 mostly Angus cattle each year, agrees it takes a spirit of compromise and cooperation. "If I sold some cattle on a grid at my expense, I would not be so quick to share the individual data results with a former owner," he explains.

As more producers begin demanding data, the mindset of order buyers and feedlots is likely to become more accommodating. They may find that more and more of the better cattle have strings attached, with further improvement as the objective.

## Let it be known up front

One option for producers is to put the request for data right up front, making it a condition of the sale, says



Livestock auction services, such as the United Producers' Paris Stockyards, Paris, Ky., are helping producers get information after the sale. After calves are sold through Paris Stockyards' certified preconditioned calf sales, the University of Kentucky Extension Service helps retrieve feeding and carcass data for producers. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF KENTUCKY EXTENSION SERVICE)

John Rule, Newalla, Okla. Rule is a partner in Ranchers Integrated Genetics LLC. Services provided through the company include order buying as well as partnership and retained-ownership cattle placements.

"We're trying to help producers we buy from get data back on those cattle," Rule says. "In some cases we make getting carcass data a condition of sale to the feedlot. And obviously, the feedlot needs to know that before the cattle even arrive. It takes a little time to find feedyards that will work with you. A lot of feedyards just don't want to do it."

However, Rule adds, many are recognizing the long-term benefits in helping producers get information on the cattle they once owned. For instance, producers who like what they find out may decide to start retaining ownership — and become custom-feeding clients of the feeder who helps them.

Cooperation helps raise the overall quality of available cattle, too, Rule notes. When producers improve the genetics of their cattle, "added value trickles down the line," he says.

Find a feeder of this mindset, and the job of getting data back on your cattle gets easier. Allan Sents, manager of McPherson County Feeders Inc., Marquette, Kan., is one of the CAB-licensed feeders surveyed who indicated a willingness to help.

"There have been occasions when we've purchased cattle through an auction barn," he says. "Then afterwards we got the request from a producer to get information back on the cattle, and we have indeed been able to do that."

"It works best for a producer to let us know in advance that he wants data back on the cattle," Sents adds. "We just need to know what type of data they want back, and whether or not they're willing to pay for it. We hope that if we cooperate with people, they'll be willing to work with us again in the future."

## Industry challenge

In the industry at large, Rule says



"Only about one out of every two feedlots is willing to work with us," says Glenn Mackie, Bourbon County (Ky.) Extension agent. "If we are able to get data back on 50% of the cattle, we feel we're getting along tremendously."

getting data back on cattle after a direct sale remains a difficult process. "It is important that producers identify how valuable that information is to their individual ranch goals and how they are going to use that carcass and feedlot performance information," he says. "But many producers don't feel comfortable or don't have the resources to identify buyers or feedlots who will work with them to achieve their individual ranch goals."

A marketing alliance or service such as Rule's can help producers relieve that marketing burden. For a per-head fee, a marketing alliance can match you with a feedyard that will buy, partner or custom-feed your calves and help you get the carcass data back on your cattle.

There are three main categories of carcass information. Group data requires no individual ear tags and tells the number and percentage breakdown of the group average in all carcass categories. Normal "tag transfer" data requires individual identification and provides information on each hot carcass weight, quality grade, yield grade and whether

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the carcass met *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand specifications. Individual carcass price is also included.

Detailed data provides an additional level of information that includes marbling score, ribeye area, fat thickness and percentage internal fat.

Another vehicle available for some calf

sellors is the special feeder-calf auction designed to help retrieve data. These special sales are still few and far between, but the trend is bound to gain momentum as success stories become more common.

**Programs at work for producers**

The United Producers' Paris Stockyards, Paris, Ky., proves such programs can work. For the past three years the auction

has held special sales for calves that are certified as preconditioned. It's one of several auctions in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan and Ohio participating in a federally funded program called the Five State Beef Initiative (FSBI), which pays part of the cost of retrieving individual carcass data.

The Paris Stockyards offers two certified preconditioned sales in November and one in December. This past year these

three sales totaled 3,100 calves. To be eligible for the sales, calves must be weaned for at least 45 days and must have been vaccinated according to the standards of the Central Kentucky Feeders Certified Preconditioned for Health (CPH 45) program. Cattle are delivered to the auction the day before the sale, shrunk 2%, and then put back on feed and water. They're sorted for condition and muscle score and then, by computer, into uniform groups to be sold in load lots.

A combination visual-electronic identification (EID) ear tag permits calves' individual identities to be retained after commingling. The producer pays an enrollment fee of \$5 per head to cover the cost of the tag and the feed at the stockyards. The auction charges regular commission for its services.

"We're seeing a growing demand for cattle sold under these conditions," says Paris Stockyards manager Bane Robertson. "The buyers are aggressive and willing to pay premiums of \$5 to \$8 per hundredweight for these cattle."

After the calves are sold, the University of Kentucky Extension Service helps retrieve feeding and carcass data for producers. "We contact order buyers to see if we can find out where cattle are going to be fed," says Glenn Mackie, Bourbon County Extension agent. "Then we call those feedlots to see whether or not they'll work with us in getting data back on the cattle. Only about one out of every two feedlots is willing to work with us. If we are able to get data back on 50% of the cattle, we feel we're getting along tremendously." FSBI contracts to collect the carcass data at the processing plant.

Another auction service working to help producers retrieve data is the cooperatively owned Central Livestock Association (CLA), headquartered in Saint Paul, Minn. CLA operates auctions and order-buying services in seven states: Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

Rich Voltz, CLA vice president of sales, says the company hopes to expand a trial program it has been operating, funded in part by federal grant monies. CLA issues EID ear tags to producers who plan to sell cattle through the cooperative and who also want to get individual feeding and carcass data back on those cattle. The cost of the tags is covered in the producer's enrollment fee of \$1.75 per head.

CLA buys the cattle outright from producers and resells them, or acts as the producer's agent in selling cattle to a feedlot. "We contact interested feedlots who have the ability to scan the electronic ear tag," Voltz says. Feeding performance and carcass data are channeled back to CLA, who in turn passes it on to the producer.

As an alternative to getting carcass data from the packing plant, CLA is trying ultrasound as a means of identifying carcass quality of finished animals before harvesting. Voltz says, "Knowing the carcass quality of cattle before they're processed helps the producer or feeder determine how the cattle can be marketed most profitably."