

OUTSIDE THE BOX

The feeder-calf story

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska



We rejoice in a newborn calf that quickly holds up its head, eyes exploring a new environment, and initiates the wobbly but steady process of

rising up, seeking sustenance and beginning its story. The expression of vigor in those first few moments of life signals to us the calf has a strong chance to not only survive, but to thrive.

We have more than a passing interest in each calf. They are not mere numbers on the inventory or assets to be leveraged. Rather, they are a link in the life of our ranch and a reminder about the truly visceral and connected nature of our business.

My connection to each calf is anchored in choices made long before its arrival. For the past 15 years, sire selection and determining which heifers to develop as replacement stock have been my responsibility. Right or wrong, those calls and their consequences are on my shoulders.

My accountability extends beyond our ranch as our calves make their way through the supply chain and ultimately become a source of nourishment and delight for consumers.

Results slow to emerge

However, the effects of selection decisions are slow to emerge given the long biological cycle of bovines. No single selection decision stands alone to be measured. Rather, the choice of breeding stock and mating system are integrated over time, with each calf the result of many choices made long before its own conception. Thus our decision horizon is longer, requiring patience, focused intent and sustained discipline.

Unlike my corporate brethren, we can ill afford to

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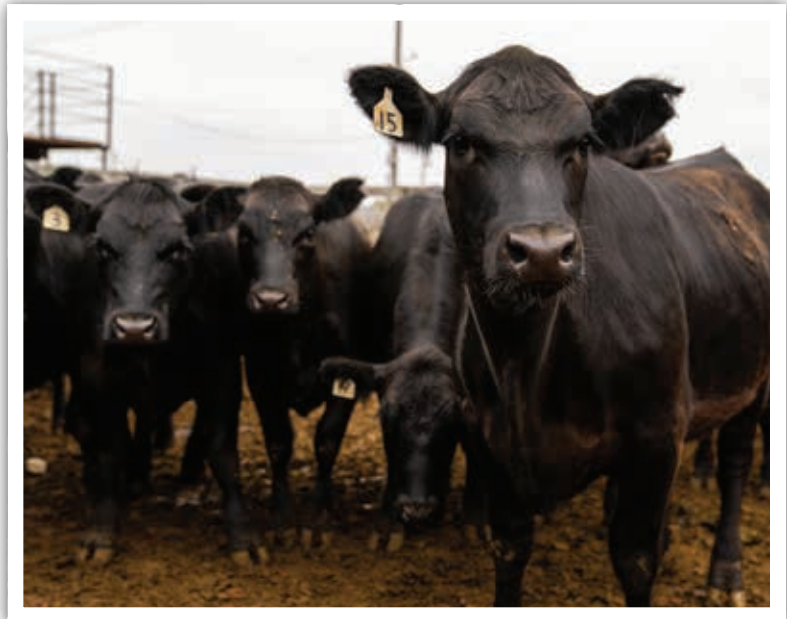


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become locked in on the quarterly report. We must conduct our work with the passion and skill of the craftsman simultaneously focused on the present, with an eye toward creating lasting value.

So it is with each step of the journey — the establishment of genetic design, the care and attention to the nutritional status of the cow herd, provision of proactive health protocols, matching cow type to the unique constraints of the ranch environment, and setting the stage for the genetic merit of the calf crop to emerge in realized performance.

To give each calf the best opportunity, people must be trained, encouraged and held accountable to living our aspirations for good stockmanship and stewardship. Our focus must be nimble enough to allow the dual focus on management that creates the environment in which the ensuing generation of calves can be conceived and successfully gestated, while assuring that the current crop is shepherded successfully.

Holistic system

Creating a list of all the decisions that affect the performance and profitability of our calves is a reminder that our work is indeed holistic. A holistic process is characterized by the intimate interconnection and understandable only by

reference to the whole. The creation and growing up of a calf — some destined for feeding humanity and others as a new generation of mama cows — is an amazingly intricate and complex process.

Left to chance, the process will produce a commodity varying in number due to the random effects of weather, predation and disease. When accomplished with intent and thoughtful management, a more valuable outcome is achieved.

To capture that value requires proactive marketing efforts, communicating the story of the calf crop through a specific value-added program, or to choose retained ownership beyond the ranch. Adding value should not be overlooked, but there are other factors that are foundational to success — cow herd fertility, percentage of live calves weaned and cow costs. Differences between the most profitable and least profitable cow-calf enterprises are most highly correlated to per-cow feed

costs and total expenses. Thus, the feeder-calf story has two chapters that might be titled:

1. Producing good cattle matters; and
2. Producing them cost-effectively matters more.

If we produce our own replacement females, the realities of Chapter 2 require us to write the feeder-calf story from a somewhat different angle. Selection strategies and mating system design must account for factors such as cow size, milk production levels and brood cow longevity in an effort to create reproductive resilience.

Turns out, there's a lot more to the feeder-calf story than meets the eye! |

Editor's note: In "Outside the Box," a regular, separate column in both the *Angus Journal*® and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, author Tom Field shares his experience as a cattleman and his insightful perspective on the business aspects of ranching. Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he holds the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship.

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