

Low-Stress Weaning — Really

Pasture weaning keeps calves calmer and healthier.

Story & photos by
BECKY MILLS

Ah, the joys of weaning. Bellowing cows. Bawling calves. Calves breaking down fences. Sick calves.

“Weaning doesn’t have to be hard,” insists Jim Gerrish, consultant, cattle producer and former researcher at the Missouri Forage Systems Research Center (FSRC), Linneus, Mo. “Consider pasture weaning.”

Now there’s a thought. Calves running up and down the highway, right? Not quite. “Typically, they stay pretty calm about it,” Gerrish says. “The cows and calves can see each other and smell each other.”

Never mind the reduction in noise pollution. Calm calves are healthy calves. “At the FSRC, we’ve been weaning on pasture since ’85. We’ve weaned about 3,400 calves, treated two calves and have had two dead calves in 17 years,” Gerrish reports.

Of the two dead calves, one was chronically ill all summer before weaning, and the other got her head stuck in a board fence.

“The No. 1 reason calves get sick is stress,” he says. Take away the stress, or as much of it as possible, and bingo — healthier calves.

First, take away the physical stress and get the rough stuff out of the way early. “Castrate at birth,” Gerrish says. “Cut or band. If you have to delay it until weaning, banding is less stressful.”

He recommends dehorning with a bull, advising producers to breed their cows to a polled bull to produce naturally hornless calves. If dehorning is necessary, Gerrish recommends doing it early, at spring roundup, with paste or electric dehorning.

Then, there is the handling itself. “Slower is quicker,” he states. “If you work slowly, you’ll get it done quicker. Noise annoys. Oil the squeaking head gates. Use inner-tube pieces to pad them. And be cool. The more upset you get with your cattle, the more upset they get with what you are trying to do.”

Next, knock the amount of

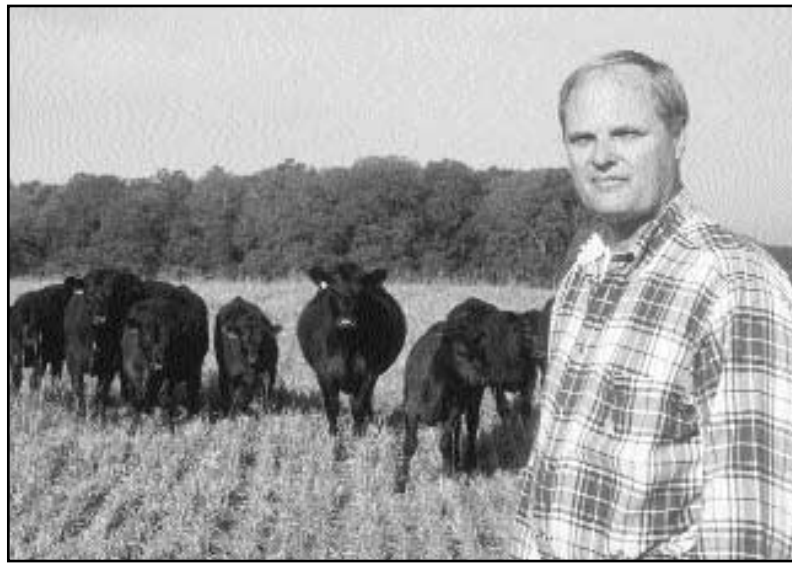
environmental stress down a notch or two. Think about your weaning lot. More than likely, it is either dusty or muddy. “Pasture is the environment they are used to, and there is little dust or mud,” he says.

If it is decent pasture, you’ve done away with the third stress factor usually inflicted upon calves at weaning — nutritional stress, says Gerrish. “If you take calves that have been on pasture and nursing their dams and give them dry harvested feed when they’ve never seen it, it takes them several days to get used to it. If you wean on pasture, they have the same feed source they’re used to. They are more likely to eat, and they do eat.”

Then there is the social stress — taking them away from mama. Ease them away by letting them visit over the fence for a couple of days, he says. They’ll practically wean themselves.

Easy weaning

Sounds heavenly, but just how do you manage this miracle? Follow Gerrish’s example at his own



Colquitt, Ga., Angus breeder James Fudge lets shade and water entice cows away from their calves at weaning.

operation, which is a rotational, management-intensive grazing (MiG) system. He separates cows and calves in the paddock, so they don’t even go through the chute.

“The first trait we cull for is disposition,” he explains. “And we’re such a low-stress operation we don’t even vaccinate at weaning. We vaccinate with seven-way blackleg, IBR (infectious bovine rhinotracheitis), PI₃ (parainfluenza-3 virus), BVD (bovine viral diarrhea), BRSV (bovine respiratory syncytial virus), haemophilus and pasteurella three weeks prior to the time we sell the calves, then booster

the vaccinations one week prior to sale.”

On Days 1 through 3, the calves are separated by a four-strand electric fence. “They still bawl but get over the bawling quicker than conventionally weaned calves,” he says.

“By 24 to 36 hours, we start moving them out day by day. By Day 7, the calves are grazing out on their own with a single-wire fence,” he reports. He either moves the cows or the calves or both, depending on where the grass is.

Gerrish emphasizes good pasture
(Continued on page 22)



Fenceline weaning cuts stress for the cows and calves on Fudge’s Angus operation.

Low-Stress Weaning (from page 21)

is a must. “For fall pasture, use stockpiled fescue and figure on one acre for five calves for the 21-day weaning period. With winter annuals, you can run more calves, probably eight to 10 per acre. For spring weaning, use anything but infected fescue.”

He adds, “Make sure the cattle are trained to an electric fence or have a

couple of paddocks with a tight five-strand barbed wire or No. 47 woven wire.”

Low-stress situation

Colquitt, Ga., Angus breeder James Fudge lets shade and water do the weaning work for him. “The pasture I wean on is two or three acres and has shade and water. I’ll let the cows and calves go in and out of it for two or three days

before I wean, then the calves know where the shade and water are.”

The corrals are in the same area as the weaning pasture, so he separates the cows and calves and puts the cows in a pasture next to the weaning pasture. It doesn’t have shade and water so the cows have to go through an open gate to the next pasture for those necessities. It doesn’t take them long, because he typically weans in July.

“They have a fenceline, 200 yards or so, they can walk. It is a dilapidated fence with one strand of hot wire. After two days of the cows’ coming back and forth, they stay in the shade, and I close the gate. Then I’ll start weaning the next bunch.”

Fudge weans by breeding group and has 20-50 calves in a group. After the first group, the next set of calves won’t have been in the pasture with the shade and water before weaning, but he puts them in with the calves that have just been weaned, and they train them.

“It’s no big deal for them,” he reports.

His supplement program is simple, too. He puts a round bale of grass hay in the weaning pasture, which is Bermuda and Bahia grass. After a week or so in the pasture, he moves the calves to a field of conventional peanuts and lets them graze it the rest of the summer. Depending on rainfall, or the lack thereof, the calves gain 1.5-2.0 pounds (lb.) a day.

Fudge’s vaccination program is also minimal. He gives a blackleg shot a week or so before weaning. “Relieving the stress does more than a vaccination program,” he maintains. “A lot of people dispute that, but it is effective for me. I’ve tried different vaccination programs, but when my calves go to the feedlot, the vaccinated calves get sick the same as the non-vaccinated cattle.”

He emphasizes, however, that he keeps the cattle for at least 120 days before he sends them to the feedlot. “If I only kept them 45 to 60 days, I’d vaccinate.”

Iowa State University (ISU) veterinarian Mike Apley has his reservations. “I wouldn’t recommend non-vaccination for respiratory disease as a blanket policy. Most feedlots would prefer that the processing program on arrival isn’t the first exposure of the cattle to the common vaccine antigens. The issue is what happens when they are commingled with cattle from lower-health-status herds.”

He adds, “I think most feedlots would like to see a history of IBR and BVD vaccination, and probably BRSV. Many of the feedlots I’m familiar with would also prefer those be modified-live vaccinations.”

However, he says pasteurized (*Pasteurella haemolytica* is now called *Mannheimia haemolytica*) and *Haemophilus somnus* vaccine use are quite variable.

He stresses, “Follow a vaccination program recommended by your veterinarian. Be especially sure to discuss the placement of modified-live IBR or BVD vaccines in calves on the cow, and, if possible, get an idea of the mindset of the buyers.”

Vaccinations are important

In Paris, Ky., commercial producer Catesby Simpson follows the vaccination program required by Kentucky’s Certified Preconditioned for Health (CPH) sales. She vaccinates two weeks before weaning with a seven-way clostridial product plus haemophilus and

a modified-live four-way viral vaccine. At weaning, or a few days after, she repeats the four-way vaccine.

"If they looked stressed, I'll wait another day or two after weaning to give them their boosters," she says. "I usually don't see them sick from weaning — the vaccination is more worrisome to them than the weaning."

Simpson also practices fenceline weaning. Although she doesn't have her pastures set up so she can keep both cows and calves in a pasture at weaning, she puts the cows in the drylot, which tends to be dusty, and the calves in the pasture next to it.

"It is a very low-stress situation," she says. "Fenceline weaning has worked very well for us. After 48 hours, I can take the cows to the back side of the farm, and they never look back."

"The No. 1 reason calves get sick is stress. Take away the stress, or as much of it as possible, and bingo — healthier calves."

— James Fudge



Simpson puts the feed troughs and water on the fenceline so the calves will have it in their faces when they visit with the cows. "The calves usually figure out the feed quickly if it is real handy," she adds.

The feed is either soy hulls or a mixture of soy hulls and corn gluten. "The soy hulls are really palatable," she remarks. In addition, she holds cattle off the weaning pasture for at least 45 days before weaning, so it is lush and green, then rotates the calves to another pasture as soon as they eat it down.

She also provides square-baled alfalfa, orchard grass and red clover hay for the calves. She estimates they gain 2 lb. per head per day during the 45-60 days between weaning and the CPH sale.

Gerrish says, "People who wean by taking their calves to the sale barn leave money on the table. Consider pasture weaning."

SUBSCRIPTION REQUEST

Please enter my subscription for 12 issues of the *Angus Journal*.

ANGUS
Journal

3201 Frederick Ave.
Saint Joseph, MO 64506-2997
(816) 383-5220
E-mail: lspir@angusjournal.com

\$50 for one year (U.S.)

\$80 for one year (Canada) (Payable in U.S. funds)

\$125 for one year (Foreign) (Payable in U.S. funds)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____

ZIP _____