

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Grandma Was Right!

My grandmothers spoke wisdom into our family with repetitive phrases designed to embed foundations of granite into our thinking and behavior.

In full disclosure, those lessons weren't immediately turned into practice. My cousins, siblings and I could be more than a handful. If there were to be an image that depicted the phrase "herding cats," we would be the poster children. Despite our lack of understanding, willing submission and discipline, Rosellen and Sue were relentless in their teaching.

In the face of our lack of restraint, the key message they delivered was the adage "patience is a virtue." The message was almost always accompanied by the establishment of a boundary or limit designed to reinforce the message. Little did I know they were preparing me for life in so many situations and on multiple levels, including the work of making breeding and selection decisions for our ranch.

A word of caution to those who engage in the process of genetic improvement — you will need patience and discipline. The process will not be convenient, nor will results be immediate. Both good and bad decisions may not fully manifest until years after they are made. Be especially wary of fads, shiny objects and group thinking. In four decades of making selection and breeding decisions, several principles have emerged as foundations to success:

1. Establish the objectives in full recognition that there are always trade-offs and priorities

must be established and followed. Those who retain their own replacement females are wise to focus on those traits that underpin cow herd performance before considering growth or carcass traits.

2. Recognize the boundaries established by forage quality and availability, precipitation, duration of the grazing season, labor expertise and availability, and other factors that create limits to herd performance. We apply the Goldilocks approach related to mature size, milk production, pulmonary arterial pressure (PAP) score or growth.
3. Establish the key metrics that drive performance, determine the appropriate range of acceptable performance and then remain steadfast.
4. Identify genetic suppliers that deliver genetics that fit your system, and consistently select sires and/or females from them that match your specific needs.
5. Home runs are exciting, but base hits win games. Steady progress achieved through clear focus and discipline will yield desired results more consistently than the high-risk "swing for the fence" approach.
6. "Measure, observe, record and analyze" are four efforts essential in building a profitable cow herd. A commitment to

intentional data-gathering and analysis provides the framework to be disciplined in selection of herd sires, but also in making appropriate culling decisions.

7. Keep learning and stay curious. While the application of patience is central to success in making genetic progress, there are supporting elements that cannot be ignored — persistence and resilience are chief among these. Persistence is having the discipline to continue onward with an intentional and well-designed plan without having full knowledge of the outcome. Resilience is the ability to overcome setbacks and to retain a level of agility and nimbleness that allows for making navigational corrections.

Building a reputation cow herd characterized by having genetic potential well-matched to the production environment is not a quick-fix proposition. If anything, it is a journey — a quest — an arduous process in search of excellence.

As with any noble and worthy effort, clarity of purpose, patience, disciplined focus, consistent execution and measurement of results are factors sure to bear fruit. **AJ**

EDITOR'S NOTE: Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.