



Angus Stakes

► by *Shauna Rose Hermel*, editor

More than meets the eye

I've been driving my family nuts this last week, anxiously awaiting the scan results on the first set of bulls they've evaluated for ultrasound body composition.

It's a cattleman's nature to pick favorites as a new calf crop begins to develop into young herd sires and potential foundation females. And my family is competitive enough at heart that each of us wants to be the first to pick the best calf.

Visual cues

At first we base our opinions on what we know of the sire and dam and visual evaluation of the calf. At weaning time, we get some objective input with weaning weights and ratios. And at a year, we get a little more objective input with yearling weights, frame scores (still needed in Missouri), scrotal circumference and the all-important breeding soundness exam.

There may be a few surprises — maybe a bull that weighs more than what we expected or a calf on the bubble that solidifies its position in the keep or cull pen. But the weights and measures, to a large extent, are confirmation of what we can see.

We'd be fooling ourselves to think that this would give us enough information to actually choose the best bull. There's so much more that doesn't meet the eye — marbling, fat and ribeye area (REA), to be precise.

No matter how good one might be at live animal evaluation, there are always bloodlines that hang leaner carcasses or smaller ribeyes than would be estimated on visual appraisal. In years past, the only tool

we've had to estimate marbling ability is the sire's expected progeny difference (EPD) — if he had one. Without knowledge of the cow's genetic values, all that tells us is that the progeny's marbling ability should be better or worse than if we had bred the cow to Bull B. Unfortunately, being sired by a "carcass" bull is not enough to automatically make a young herd sire a "carcass" leader.

Not guessing anymore

Ultrasound body composition measurements provide an objective measure of those under-the-hide traits. Whereas progeny testing's use was limited by cost and test herd availability, ultrasound is available to large-scale and small-scale breeders alike at a more reasonable cost.

Where steer feedouts provided insight on only a few animals, ultrasound data can be collected on entire calf crops — heifers, bulls and steers. The increased number of animals and herds going into the evaluation gives me more confidence in the carcass predictions on any herd sire evaluated.

As my brother pointed out after looking

through the first set of data, it's amazing how consistently the calves ranked by sire for each particular trait. Yet you can also see the influence of maternal grandsires across sire progeny groups.

Part of an equation

I suppose you can guess that my sentimental favorite wasn't the top carcass bull in the lot. That doesn't change the fact he excelled in growth traits, and it doesn't change the proven fertility levels in his pedigree. We just know more about his potential. We'll be a little smarter in how to use him, and we'll know what traits we need to emphasize when breeding his dam for her next calf.

Being more informed seldom makes decision-making easier. After all, very few bulls can excel in every trait. But having a complete EPD profile should prevent us from making costly mistakes on animals we might not have found fault in otherwise. And it will help us to identify the animals that excel by doing everything pretty well but that don't stand out on any one particular trait.

As more seedstock producers generate body-composition EPDs on replacement heifers, consider the value of this information to seedstock and commercial producers alike. What will it do to bull and female demand in the seedstock sector? What will it do to demand for Angus heifers and bulls in the commercial sector?

The outlook Cattle-Fax presented at the 2002 Cattle Industry Convention and Trade Show in Denver, Colo., predicted herd expansion through 2005. Is your herd ready to capitalize on the information advantage?

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