

OUTSIDE THE BOX



by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Less is more

Standing on the floor of the Furniture Row racing team headquarters, I couldn't help but change my perception of the sport. As opposed to race day, there was no adrenaline rush. The atmosphere was decidedly quiet by comparison.

In place of the stress of competition, there was an air of meticulous professionalism. The floors sparkled, the staff was focused with an intentional and confident pace to their work, and engineering and design excellence exuded from every molecule of the place.

Having only a passing interest in NASCAR racing, and based on watching bits and pieces of races on television, I had expected a more chaotic and overwhelming environment.

As we continued on the tour, our host invited us into the world of a successful racing team, where success is built on precise engineering and fabrication; collection, analysis and utilization of real-time and historic data; developing strategic alliances with competitors; compiling deep

knowledge about nearly every inch of each race-day site on the circuit; and embracing the need for constant innovation.

As the tour concluded, our guide's final words hit me like a thunderbolt: "The key to racing excellence is that you have to recognize when less is more."

Most things I learn are eventually tested against our ranch. In this case, the lessons from NASCAR resonated most deeply when it comes to the engineering upon which the success of our herd and our downstream customers rests — genetics.

Lessons to be learned

As I think about the perfect bull battery, there are some clear lessons to be learned from the creators of high-performance cars.

First of all, we need a set of bulls, not just an individual. Racing teams may only put one car on the track on race day, but they have built multiple copies to prepare them for the rigors of the competitive season.

Furthermore, every attempt is made to modify the car for the conditions of the race environment: The unique surface and design of each venue, lessons learned from previous years, and the impacts of weather. While racing fans may admire the look of the finished machine, success depends on the engine, the chassis, the suspension system, and the host of inter-working components contained within the car's exterior.

So it is with cattle breeding, an attractive bull with a poorly tuned engine or a flawed chassis is of little

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value. Each ranch is analogous to the unique “race track” with its own idiosyncrasies and conditions. Thus, we have to find a way to select only those sires that are a fit for the environment in which we compete.

Power of data sharing

The power of information and data sharing within the racing world was apparent, and so it is for the commercial cow-calf enterprise. A missed opportunity in the beef business is the two-way exchange of information between seedstock suppliers and their respective customers.

Perhaps even more valuable would be the development of a network of information exchange between commercial cow-calf producers to facilitate benchmarking, real-time sharing of information that sheds light on key performance metrics, and designed to stimulate

innovation in the pursuit of excellence. This exchange would ultimately enable cow-calf producers to better evaluate the performance of inputs ranging from genetics to health care products to equipment.

The concept of “less is more” is becoming more critical to the cow-calf business. At our ranch the greatest challenge is finding bulls that help us moderate mature size and milk production, enhance fertility and cow longevity, and build offspring that are structurally and behaviorally sound.

As calf prices moderate, input costs rise, and weather and government policies continue to add volatility and uncertainty. Our ranch team is seeking ways to make better decisions, to fine-tune our enterprise, and to gain better control over the most critical control points that affect profitability.

We don’t want more growth, bigger ribeye measurements, or more potential for milk production. Speed alone doesn’t win races.

We need cattle that can handle the curves, that don’t require excessive pit stops to fix problems, and that can perform given the real conditions of race day as opposed to an ideal situation created by computer simulation.

As we prepare for breeding season, consider this column as a little fuel for thought from our friends at NASCAR.

Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines!



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