

CATTLE CULTURE

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

Navigating the Numbers

Love it or hate it, math and numbers are a vital part of the cattle industry.

Being a writer and editor, I'm sure it's not really all that surprising I'd rather have my nose in a book than solving math problems. Throughout high school and even into some of my college courses, I remember groaning any time I was asked to complete something even as simple as a multiplication problem.

Whether you're a National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) member or the parent (or even grandparent) of an NJAA member, I'm sure at least one of you reading this column can relate to my aversion to numbers and math.

The slightly bad news, however, is the industry we've chosen to call home is all about numbers. We all have different goals for ourselves and our Angus herds, but not a single one of us ever sets out in this business with the desire to lose money.

The good news is navigating all these numbers doesn't have to be difficult. Consider this month's column your cheat sheet to understanding the math behind the Angus breed, no matter your herd or operation size.

Managing the math

My first glimpse into the calculations of raising cattle came with the purchase of my first heifer in 2009. My parents had me put everything down on paper. From the math behind general expenses to the

calculations behind a feed program, a major part of my duties as an NJAA member was about the numbers.

With this in mind, the first suggestion I have for "navigating the numbers" is to start small.

Start with a budget. Research different methods of tracking expenses and incomes and start there. Write down every single financial transaction that occurs on your operation and with your project.

For younger children who might not yet be ready to tackle the heavy finances, you can still help teach them some basics. Work with them to calculate how much a calf needs to eat, and teach them how to measure specific amounts out using whatever instruments you have. Speaking from personal experience, you can still get a lot accomplished with a small scale borrowed from your house and an old coffee can.

Think finances and feed calculations sound simple enough? Turns out the cattle industry has a whole different set of numbers to present its members — expected progeny differences (EPDs). When I was younger, I remember how intimidating the panel of EPDs appeared at the bottom of my heifers' registration papers. After all, the combination of letters and numbers adds a whole new element of challenge.

I think it's wise to never let yourself forget the American Angus Association does everything for a reason. Those numbers, intimidating or not, are actually there to help you as a breeder. Use EPDs every single breeding season. If you want to step up your game, it's time to start breeding for superior cattle, phenotypically and genotypically.

My final piece of advice is to seek out knowledge constantly. The one thing about math is the numbers will never lie. Two plus two will always equal four, but the technology of the industry is constantly changing, allowing for new and better ways for you to find the answer.

Sources of knowledge come in many forms. We've talked about securing a mentor before, but if you don't think that's the right step for you when it comes to numbers, the Association still offers many forms of assistance. Articles and columns in the *Angus Journal* are always being published to explain genetic progress. The Association is just a phone call away, and Angus University has tons of resources from videos to articles providing all sorts of insight into the Business Breed.

Long story short, don't let the math in the cattle industry intimidate you. To reach the new levels of success you've been seeking, you'll have to learn to navigate the numbers. **AJ**