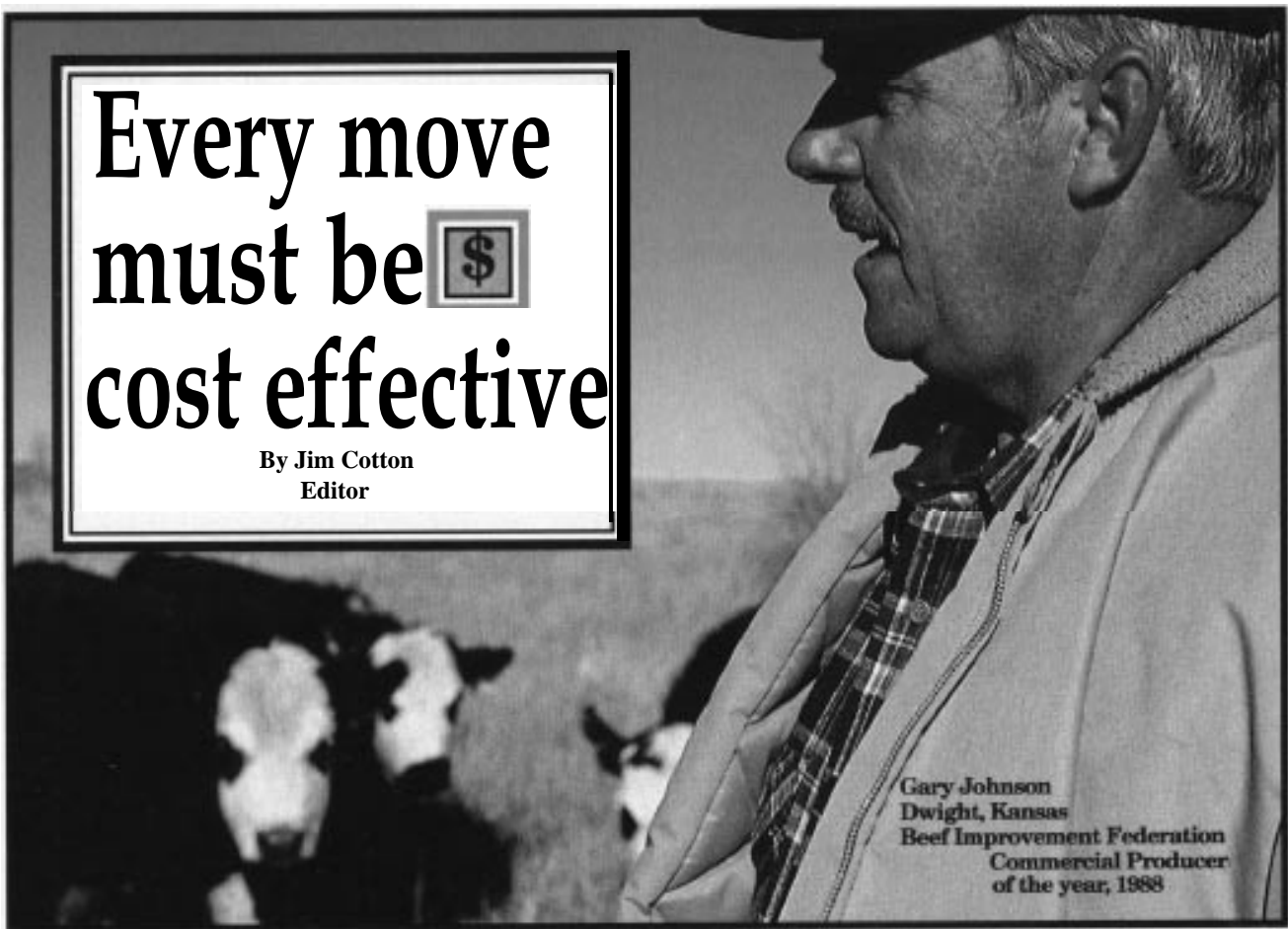


Every move must be cost effective

By Jim Cotton
Editor



Gary Johnson
Dwight, Kansas
Beef Improvement Federation
Commercial Producer
of the year, 1988

Mother Nature doesn't seem to change her mind. Cattlemen trying to install carcass data in their selection program realize Her rules aren't very flexible. And yet, as they study it, cattle producers may find carcass information contains a reassuring predictability.

The more tools we have to study it, the more inclined we may be toward including it in our program. Gary Johnson thinks so:

"We may find we use carcass trait data more as a weeding out process than one where every-e tries to latch on to this superpower bull. Most of us won't be able to use the ultimate in carcass bulls because I suspect there'll be too many trade-offs. There are some antagonistic things out there."

Johnson is from Dwight, Kan., and the 1988 Beef Improvement Federation Commercial Producer of the Year. He is anxious to fit carcass merit into his program.

"As breed associations gather reliable carcass data, we will include it in our

selection criteria," he says. "As we integrate carcass information into our selection, there will probably be some antagonistic traits. We will have to select very carefully to make progress. We will have to always remember that fertility and easy fleshing are very important to efficiency."

Those two items, fertility and fleshing ability, have proved their worth for this Flint Hills cattleman. They are not to be trifled with, so vital they are to his program and any progressive commercial producer's.

Carcass information on his cattle represents a logical and satisfying step for Gary. He needs it

to complete an ambitious profile on his commercial herd. He's threaded strong recordkeeping-marketing-managing fibers through his operation. All pull together. One thread isn't tested without the others responding. The unity is tight.

Just some random comments illustrate how he thinks out loud. "Feeder cattle prices are so favorable right now,



Part of the Gary Johnson clan. Joan is a DVM and also holds a Ph.D in veterinary pathology. Shown are Paige, age 7, and Jace, 9. The one-eyed Red Heeler is Pete.



that the risk of feeding cattle just isn't worth it. . . . There are some really wonderful things that have happened with our options and puts and calls that allow us to protect a breakeven price. . . .

"But I guess I'd like to try it (feeding) plus get some carcass information back on the cattle. The cattle would probably bring \$550 now (December, 1988) and that isn't bad for last spring's calf. If I could guarantee myself that much, I might be tempted to get some good information for myself and the Angus Association."

His concern is with benchmarking bulls and finding some solid reference points. "Getting bulls compared is the hard part, and I think we're about ready to join AHIR."

Gary Johnson leaves little to chance as might be suspected, yet if the numbers are in place, he has little reluctance toward buying bulls sight unseen.

"If the seller is knowledgeable and honest, there just isn't a problem with that at all. He knows his cowherd better than I do. Almost without fail, the bulls



"He's a QLC Target son out of a Playboy cow that would have come from the Giovanni herd in California. They're known for their modest birth weights and maternal traits. He's an easy-fleshing kind of bull and yet is pretty consistent in his calves."

have been better than I expected."

Expectations come high with Johnson. He is cow-conscious and always assessing fertility, fleshing ability, soundness, and efficiency across the herd. Mature cow size is a concern. He doubts 1,400-pound cows can compete with the 1,100-pounder quite common in the area. Milk values have to be known.

Over the years, he's selected for high milk values through EPD. He followed this path as he thought his cows were lacking in milk. With the resources he had available, he believed he could increase their efficiency by balancing EPD values and matching the cows to the resources.



"My goal is to be cost effective rather than emphasizing minimum input or maximum output. When we got into frame selection we began forgetting some very basic things the industry has always relied on. Fertility is number one. Profitability, not pounds, is number two."

While carcass merit is becoming more of a study for him, he's not considering a terminal sire - of any breed.

"I really like cows," he says. "I just like the maternal side of things. I like to see a heifer become better than her mother."

Bulls and breeding he hopes will preserve those values include sons of PS Power Play, QLC Target, and AAR New Trend. In '89, he'll introduce some sons of "9J9" and Emulation N Bar 5522. These names appear again in the AI sire roster - the Emulation bull plus some QAS Traveler, QLC Target, AAR New Trend, and Rito 549 of Ideal 154 9J9 straws will be used.

Here's an approach that has already skewed the heifer milk performance upward. The 1988 heifer crop, in fact, appears to have attained the highest milk values ever in his experience.

Yet, this group also produced the highest preg check ever on the ranch. Gary's reaction?

"I sometimes question that whole assumption. It might prove that if you have cattle with the right capacity, you might be able to get by with just a little more milk than if you've got the frail kind."

Frail won't cut it here in this rolling grassland where cattle have been a family



"We start calving the first of February with a 40-day season." Many of the cattle shown are direct QLC Target and AAR New Trend daughters. Some are by Target-Jetliner bulls, and a few are by New Trend bulls. They're bred primarily to Emulation N Bar 5522 and QAS Traveler.



Jace's heifer was grand champion at the Morris County Fair. An AAR New Trend daughter.

tradition and part of the local culture since the earliest settlement. It's an agreeable place for cattle; the climate, grass, and management have produced some of America's most fabled herds, here in the Flint Hills.

But Gary points out what he wants are survivors. "We don't want bigger cows. We want more productive cows. Some of those sires we've been using are pretty beefy animals."



The Angus-Hereford cross is the foundation of the Johnson herd. Through careful sire and female selection, he has increased yearling weights 200 pounds during the last 10 years. Emphasis is on EPD values.

His heifer crop hasn't gone unnoticed Gary's been able to develop a heifer market. "And at the same time, the performance on our steers has been

excellent. We've had people tell us that they have outweighed their feedlot pen contemporaries by 100 pounds."

A modification to his program provides



Reactions to a beef producer's program

Dr. Larry Corah, Extension Animal Sciences and Industry, Kansas State University, Manhattan...

"It would be...difficult to find a more performance-minded commercial cow-calf producer in Kansas than Gary. (w)eaning weights have improved by approximately 170 pounds and... yearling weights by over 200 pounds. Even with the progress that Gary has made in the last eight years, he feels he has only begun to scratch the surface of where he will be in the next five to ten years."

"To see Gary carrying a sire summary around and taking time to visit with other commercial men is very common. . . . Gary has served a threeyear term on the Kansas Bull Testing Committee. One of the real pleasures for us at the University has been Gary's close proximity to the school and hiswillingness to work with the University in a wide variety of ways... Students always come away extremely impressed with the depth of his knowledge and thoroughness of his approach to cattle management. Gary has actively participated in University field trials, serving. . . in evaluating sychnorization systems."

Jan R. Oleen, President, Farmers State Bank, Dwight, Kansas...

"We don't hear about those operators who through their ability to be flexible and efficient never had severe financial problems. . . . Gary Johnson is very serious about the efficiency and profitability of his livestock operation, as he treats it like a 24hour business. (h)e has met most of his financial goals in some very tough times.

"Gary is not adverse to making changes in his livestock operation. He is presently applying most all of the latest in management practices in his livestock operation, including AI programs on better commerical cows to raise replacement females, heat synchronization to shorten calving seasons, individual performance records, EPDs in selecting bulls, and the use of yearling bullsto speed up generation progress.

"Gary has been a willing speaker at livestock meetings throughout the country on what has worked for him in his operation, but maybe more important, he is willing to tell what has not worked."

Galen Fink, Fink Angus, Manhattan, Kansas...

"Matching of cattle to resources, soundness, fleshing ability, udder quality, and fertility combined with a strong usage of EPDs create a balance that is a must to Gary..."

Replacement females are becoming a popular item as area ranchers realize the extra value that Gary has bred in his females.

"It's a tough but challenging job toproduce seedstock that fit his criteria. Gary Johnson and his family are a tribute to the commerical cattle world. They have been through good and bad times, but through hard work, dedication, and desire to improve, he has produced one of the most outstanding commercial herds in the country"

Donald A. Laughlin, Regional Manager, American Angus Assn . . .

"Although the operation is large and diverse, the task of running the day-today ranching operation is done with a limited amount of outside labor..."

"I have used Gary in programs and as a spokesman to relay the message of how important performance records, especially EPD, are as a profitable management tool to the beef industry

"Gary has been most influential in tellingproducers that todays modern performance technology does indeed work and that by using it, financial and personal accomplishments can be gained. Weaning weights and sale weights have increased dramatically and with the use of birth weight data, calving difficulty for heifers has decreased significantly."

for earlier calving in the spring. "So we can wean earlier," he explains. This will help keep the grass flesh on our cows and when we retain our calves through slaughter, we will hit an earlier market which is typically better." As pointed out earlier, he doesn't plan to feed cattle to

slaughter while feeder cattle are bringing a premium over finished stock.

Producing superior cattle and getting paid a premium for them is a special satisfaction achievable largely at the local level, the stockyards in town. There may be no accomplishment quite like it in the

cattlemans year. "Using sire summary data we are able to produce cattle that will perform far above the average and be predictable in that performance."

The formula takes us back to cost effectiveness. Performance isn't just high



Some management maxims and methods at Johnson Farms

... **Performance** records have been used for 10 years to select herd bulls; nine years to cull the cowherd.

... Individual IDs on cows and calves, birth weight on calves, weaning and yearling weights, average calving interval on cows and calving ease **records** are maintained.

... Two **breeds** are utilized, Angus and Hereford. Crossbred female progeny are merchandised as breeding stock.

... **Spring calving** is February 20 to May 5; fall, September 20 to November 20.

"We calve our first-calf heifers about 30 days before the cows. We bring them in close and watch them very closely (every two hours, day and night). Since we sell our cattle by the pound, we don't want to give up too many pounds at selling time. Most of the time the lowest birth weight means the lowest selling weight. With this in mind, I would rather assist a heifer than sell a dink. Remember, we sell pounds. Dead calves don't gain very fast.

"In 1988, we weaned 166 calves from 168 heifers. We lost one at birth and one at one week of age.

"Our cows calve out in the pastures about five miles from home and are checked twice a day during a 60-day calving season. Daily, new calves are castrated, dehorned with paste if they have horn buds, and tagged. Most calves have their sire I. D. on their tags also, thus we can cull sires when there is a problem with their progeny"

... **AI** the top end of heifers and cows for greater predictability of offspring from proven sires with superior genetics in traits emphasized.

... Sixty five percent of production is **sold** as yearling feeders both steers and approximately bottom third of heifers. Thirty percent of the heifer progeny are sold as bred heifers.

... Bull selection is based on **EPD values** that are high in growth, positive in milk, and moderate in birth weight. "In regard to natural service, I select bulls with these traits consistently 'stacked throughout their pedigree. AI sires are also selected for high accuracies in these traits.

The 14 Angus bulls I own and use in natural service have average EPDs of +3.4 birth weight, 31.6 weaning weight, 54.5 yearling weight, and +8.5 milk. The eight Hereford bulls average +3.3 birth weight, 36.0 weaning weight, 61.0 yearling weight, and +16.1 milk."

... "All **bulls** must first meet my EPD criteria. Individual records from within the herd are reviewed closely. The bulls with the highest ratios and moderate in frame and adequate scrotal circumference are purchased, if affordable."

... "Individual performance, performance in pedigree, disposition, milk and udder of the dam, frame, fleshing ability, and physical soundness are all essential in my selection of **females**."

... Cows are culled when determined open by pregnancy checks, with unsound udders, lacking a solid mouth, poor fleshing ability, physical unsoundness that is not practical to correct, or calves with low weaning weights.

... **Weaning** calves are handfed in bunks three or four times a day the first three days. At the end of the second day, calves are typically eating hay toppedressed with five pounds of grain mix. Mix includes milo, soybean meal, vitamin A, Aureo-S 700 2+2 and Decox. "In the last two years, we have used this program on more than 1,000 calves. We lost one calf due to bloat and spent less than \$50 on medicine for treatment."

... Our **first-calf heifers** - 180 - are divided into three groups. The ones carrying the most flesh, the middle group, and those carrying the least. That way we can feed accordingly. There's no sense in feeding a heifer that's already carrying the flesh. The thing you have to watch is if it's the same critter that needs help every year, then maybe it's the wrong kind of critter. Having sire codes on most of our calves is good because you may have a bull that just isn't working for your program."

... Approximately 300 cows and heifers were AI'd in the spring of 1988. The cows were brought into heat using **prostaglandins** and then observed for heat. The heifers were fed MGA for 16 days and 17 days later were given an injection of prostaglandins and observed for standing heat in three days. They were then AI'd to bulls with light birth weight EPDs, having good milk and growth EPDs.

Eighty percent of the AI'd heifers were confirmed pregnant to the AI date. Ninety percent of those heifers calved in the first 21 days of the 40-day breeding season.

... At weaning, our calves are given **injecions** for IBR, BVD, P13, BRSV, *huemophilus somnus*, and *pasteurella multocida*, and *hemolytica*. Three weeks later, they are given their booster shots. They are also wormed, branded, implanted, and receive their booster for blackleg at this time."

... Role of **Beef Improvement Federation** toward the **commercial cattleman**: "1) Promotion of research and increasing availability of information; 2) Standardization of performance records; 3) Promotion of sire summary data; 4) Encourage breed associations to measure cow longevity within herds and measure carcass traits for inclusion in sire summaries."

numbers but getting there on less fuel and input. He typically supplements at a three pounds a day rate- two pounds of milo and a pound of soybean meal. "The rest of it is free-picking. If I can have a cow with a calf on her in the middle of December, and I can keep them for less than 20 cents a day, I'll tell you what that works."

Grain is part of Gary's management. He finds nothing extravagant about it as



"When EPDs are used correctly, they can build a whole herd of great cows, not just that great individual."

it usually proves the cheapest supplement year after year.

"Last year, we bought grain back from

the government for \$40 a ton. You could have bought prairie hay for \$50 a ton and there's no comparison. Over the years, I wonder if too many people get locked into thinking - 'Oh, no, you don't feed grain to a stock cow; we can feed cubes. Well, cubes are \$150 a ton right now and grain's around \$75. I guess I can feed the grain."

Heifers are commonly fed five pounds of grain mix per day and all the dry grass they can eat. "They're not plumb fat or anything, but their haircoats are good. We go a lot by haircoat."

The feeding period usually extends from the first of February "until we get into grass." Both native and improved species and alfalfa form the roughage regime.

Trying to always keep his focus on the total scope, the big picture, Gary manages his resources and adjusts toward options. Years could repeat themselves more or less predictably but there's more challenge in fine-tuning the process and applying new tools in new ways. That's why he's such a devotee of EPD.

"When EPDs are used correctly, they can build a whole herd of great cows instead of that great individual."

That's why he doesn't exert too much pressure on birth weight *in toto*. He's found bulls with light birth weights just didn't measure up at yearling time. There was no free meal.

"We found those calves were weighing almost a hundred pounds less at yearling time." That, he can't afford. If the yearlings were 60 pounds lighter, and there were 30 of them sired by the easy-calver, the loss in revenue at 75 cents per pound could amount to \$1,300 to \$1,400.

"I can almost hire a person full time to watch those 30 head of heifers calve for that."

Calving is a time of fulfillment. "We really go after it. When we're calving, it's harvest time. Just like running that combine 15 hours a day."

The pattern of moisture during the winter of 1987 and spring of 1988 alerted Gary to how crippling a summer drought might be. For that reason, he leased some extra grass and didn't burn the native grass in the spring, a common practice in the Flint Hills.

"Thus we have a lot of dormant grass that we can supplement with a small amount of grain and protein to meet the maintenance requirements. We also weaned calves earlier (two weeks) so the cows could maintain their good condition. We also harvested more crop residue."

Future planning will likely incorporate more cool season grasses so the grazing season can be lengthened with less mechanical harvesting of feed. Most of the Johnson pastures have been crossfenced for rotational grazing.

An operation's life might be divided into chunks, and time measured from some high or critical point when new directions are taken. Gary expanded during a period when many in the industry were liquidating. Consequently, he was able to build a foundation of cheaper inputs. Larger numbers produced more revenue when "the worm turned" and profits returned to the producer. He has plotted these moves with care. His philosophy centers on trying "new things and ideas you think will work. But do so on a limited basis. Use a business approach when making decisions."

He had 22 cows of his own in 1966 when his father died of a heart condition. He took on the challenge of the family farm and began a study and building

program that was long term in almost every respect It paid off.

Now the herd numbers 600 cows, 700 yearlings. Resources include 6,000 acres of range and 1,500 acres of cultivated cropland. He'd always wanted to farm but some detours intervened -- study at Bethany College, Lindsborg, Kan., and Kansas State University plus a tour with the U. S. Army. When he resumed his studies, his father advised: "Now, don't take ag courses. Take some business. It looks to me like down the line, you're going to have to have some business savvy."

"His guidance was real good there."

Gary's not been shy about seeking advice and studying examples. He relies on his own reading and research plus seeking ideas from meetings and seminars. And he credits his association with key personnel at KSU through extension field trials and university research as motivating. "It's given me



"We go a lot by haircoat."

insight toward striving to do a better job.

I have also learned a great deal through personal observation and experience.

Galen Fink at Manhattan has probably had the most pronounced outside influence on my cattle operation in recent years. We have exchanged many ideas. I appreciate his common sense approach and integrity.

"I've really been fortunate because I've had people around that have really helped. Galen's one of those ram registered breeders who can look at the whole picture and determine if this or that can make a difference to the cattle industry in the end - and yet still have something that's merchantable."

As a user of their products and subject to their influence, how does he perceive registered breeders and their role?

"Registered breeders should add more

dollars to their customer's income than to his costs. They can do this with a well-mapped performance program. Mating cattle with wide variations will not give much predictability. Every registered breeder should ask himself this question -- will cattle I sell have a positive effect on my customer's retained female replacements, the feeder, the packer, and the consumer?"

His perspective has not been formed in a vacuum. Johnson has been a member or held directorships with the Kansas Livestock Assn., Kansas Hereford Assn., Kansas Angus Assn., Kansas Farm Bureau, and the Morris County Farm Bureau, Morris County 4-H (Foundation Lifetime Member), and the Morris County Fair Board.

One might mistake him for a registered breeder because of his interest in EPD and harnessing the concept's power to change (*see sidebar; Dr. Larry Corah comments*). "I'm just trying to help other commercial producers understand

the sire summaries and select better stock," he asserts.

His enthusiastic crusade toward better cowherd management and sire selection has not gone unnoticed. He spoke at the Eighth Annual Agricultural Symposium, Montarray, Mexico, October, 1987; the

general assembly of an American Hereford Assn. type conference; the Kansas Livestock Assn. cow-calf and stocker seminar; and the Oklahoma Angus Association's performance seminar. The Johnson family has hosted students from Mexico and Taiwan through the International Meat and Livestock Program of KSU. He

serves on the Kansas Bull Test Committee. Gary was nominated for the BIF honor by the Purebred Council of the Kansas Livestock Assn.

Of that milestone, he said:

"There are a number of well-managed commercial operations across the country, and I am pleased, proud, and humbled to be recognized as one of

them. To make this recognition meaningful to others, we will stive to do a better job in the fnture as we find there is always room for improvement."

Any regrets or decisions he would reverse? 'What's done is done! I always look to the future."

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