

Beef Logic

by R.A. "Bob" Long



Let's examine showing standards, terminology

The beef cattle showing has been an important part of my life. It has involved both winning and losing in junior shows, state fairs, the International and the National Western. It also has included judging both steers and breeding classes at those events.

This exposure has convinced me that cattle shows can be a powerful force in changing breed ideals and breeding decisions. But, as a spectator at major shows during the past few years, I've become greatly concerned for our industry.

Visual appraisal of live animals in general and in the showing in particular has been ridiculed by some animal scientists and performance advocates as a subjective measure and, therefore, illegitimate. Admittedly, the cattle are not contemporaries, and even an accurate showing evaluation cannot replace legitimate performance records. However, I sincerely believe that, with knowledge of basic anatomy, training, experience and a little natural ability, most people visually can identify desirable body composition and sound structure in live cattle.



By so doing, the judges have an opportunity to show spectators the composition and structure necessary for efficient beef production. Unfortunately, from my observation, current judging at many of the major shows suggests a failure to accomplish this.

One only has to examine the reasons the judges give when justifying official placings to be concerned. A typical statement might be, "We liked this top bull because of his neck extension, his overall length and thickness, and the tremendous development in the lower one-third of his body."

Such a statement serves only two purposes. First, it brands the judge as unqualified. Second, it misleads the spectators. Analysis of the statement follows.

'Neck extension and overall length ...'

The bovine skeleton grows proportionately. The entire spinal column,

which extends from the base of the skull through the tail, grows in concert. Therefore, each segment's percentage of the total length of the spinal column remains constant. A small-framed animal has a shorter spinal column than a large-framed one, but the length of the neck or any other segment of the backbone is a constant percentage of the total length.

It is common in the cattle industry to hear people refer to differences in length of neck, back or rump as a method of evaluation. The implication is that a certain animal is superior because it has a greater or lesser percentage of its length in a certain segment or area. This situation simply does not exist.

Such opinions are the result of inaccurate observation resulting from illusions caused by differences in slope of shoulder, muscular development, fat deposition or hair. Further, the fact that an individual has a longer body than another has nothing to do with composition. Percentage of muscle, fat and bone is the consideration.

'Thickness ...'

The width, or thickness, of an animal's body reveals nothing of its composition. Some cattle are thick because of muscling, and others are thick as a result of fat. An accurate visual determination of composition requires knowledge of muscle- and fat-deposition patterns and their effects on shape and posture.

'Tremendous development in the lower one-third ...'

Overall depth of body includes a combination of loose hide and the fat deposited therein and is not a measure of the capacity of the digestive tract or that of the thoracic and abdominal cavities.

Development below the floor of the chest and the stifle consists entirely of skin and fat. It is waste and results in Yield Grade (YG) 4 and 5 carcasses. "Sagging bellies" also can result from excessive fat deposits around

the kidneys and on the intestines and the mesenteries that support them.

The fact that the abdominal cavity is filled with fat does not increase the capacity of the gastrointestinal tract. Further, such fat deposits reduce room for fetal growth and can extend into the pelvic canal and cause calving problems.

Certified judges?

Cattlemen, hear this: I don't wish to be a controversial rabble-rouser. Mine is a sincere concern for the future of the beef industry and the Angus breed in particular.

Historically, the beef cattle showing has established ideals that were absurdly small, then ridiculously tall. Isn't it time to consider criteria that relate to beef production?

The certification of ultrasound technicians involves training and actual testing on cattle that are slaughtered. Why not certify showing judges only after training them and establishing their ability to identify accurately the body composition of live beef cattle?

Many breeders believe what they see and hear at major shows and make breeding decisions based on the results. The continuation of current procedures may damage what is recognized as the greatest beef breed the world has known.

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Editor's note: This column is sure to rouse some discussion. Share your viewpoint on our new Angus discussion list. Currently under construction, this list will be active by publication of this issue. It is intended as a forum for breeders to exchange ideas on any topic. To subscribe to the e-mail discussion list, visit www.angusjournal.com on the Internet and follow the instructions posted there. For assistance, call the Web Marketing Department at (816) 383-5200.