

Beef Logic

by R.A. (Bob) Long



Length — frustrating and meaningless

This morning finds your author exasperated and frustrated. After some 40 years of lectures, speeches and published articles concerned with the importance of the composition of beef cattle and the identification thereof, it's disappointing that the beef industry still attempts to evaluate cattle by describing them in terms that have nothing to do with beef production efficiency.

Equally frustrating is the fact that cattlemen make selection and breeding decisions using baseless and imagined criteria. For example, "long-bodied, big-volumed cattle with lots of capacity" is a typical phrase used by cattlemen to describe individuals they prefer, yet there is neither data nor logic to support such measures as indicative of superior reproduction, growth rate, composition or overall beef production efficiency.

It's particularly disappointing to find these meaningless terms being used by beef industry leaders who are respected friends, seedstock producers, show-ring judges, university judging team coaches and artificial insemination (AI) stud personnel responsible for bull procurement.

Length of body is an often used item in the evaluation of beef cattle. Most cattlemen accept length as an asset. In advertising breeding stock or in describing sale toppers and show winners, there is almost a universal use of terms such as long-bodied, long-spined, stretchy, long-backed and long-coupled. These terms are always meant to be complimentary. However, the individuals using these terms never justify length as a contributor to increased

efficiency of beef production.

The fact is that length, in itself, is of no value in meat animals and, therefore, should not be a consideration. Please read the following discussion carefully and think logically about it.

Animals grow proportionately. The growth of a single bone is not controlled by a single gene but rather by a large unknown number of genes acting in unison to control development of the entire skeleton. For example, the entire spinal column (backbone) grows in concert. Therefore, the various segments are a constant percentage of the total length of the spinal column. This is true in all cattle. A small-framed animal has a shorter backbone than a larger-framed one; but, the neck or loin region — or any other segment — of the backbone is a constant percentage of total length.

It's very 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 condition simply does not exist. Such opinions are the result of inaccurate observation resulting from illusions caused by differences in slope of shoulder, muscular development or fat deposition.

Not only the skeleton but also the musculature grows proportionately. This explains why each wholesale cut (chuck, rib, short loin, loin end, rump and round) of a carcass represents a constant percent of the total carcass weight.

A cull, canner, Jersey cow carries the same percent of carcass weight in the hindquarter, or any wholesale cut, as does an ideal slaughter steer. The difference in the value per pound of the cuts is in the percentage of lean, fat and bone and the tenderness, juiciness and flavor of the lean. This eliminates the use of the often heard phrase, "more weight in the high-priced cuts," which is completely without basis.

Another common belief is that length is an indication of breeding and feeding capacity. However, linear measurements do not predict either reproductive efficiency or the amount of feed an animal can or will eat. Neither do such measurements predict rate or efficiency of gain.

In summary, beef carcasses are evaluated by maturity, degree of marbling, amount of fat and degree of muscling — length is not measured or considered. Further, there is absolutely no research data or evidence of any kind to support the belief that the length of a beef animal influences reproductive efficiency, growth rate or carcass desirability.

Invalidation of "length of body" as a method of evaluation of beef cattle should not cause disappointment. On the other hand, it is good news since it simplifies evaluation. Just treat the cattle alike, measure and record reproductive efficiency, growth rate and carcass characteristics and use the records in breeding and culling decisions.

We Welcome Your Input!

Our Beef Improvement section has been expanded to include more information for today's performance-minded breeder. Both "Beef Logic" by Bob Long and the "What's Your Beef?" columns serve as a forum for Angus breeders and industry experts to express their opinions on current issues and topics of breed improvement and performance programs.

Send, fax or E-mail your comments to:
 Angus Journal, Editor
 3201 Frederick Blvd., St. Joseph, MO 64506
 FAX: (816) 233-6575 | E-mail: shermel@angus.org

