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Maternal Cattle: Making Difficulties Easier

It was an unusual time of the day to be getting a call from the in-laws, so when my brother-in-law phoned mid-afternoon in February, we momentarily braced for the worst.

My father-in-law had been in an accident. The details were conveyed quickly: something with a cow, a gate and a pickup ride to the nearest emergency room half an hour from the ranch just to be told, “You’ll have to go to a bigger hospital.”

My father-in-law ended up with a few broken bones — in total, he had five fractures throughout his left leg. For him the pain was easier to bear than the time spent on the couch, knowing that calving season would soon be upon them and he had no way to help.

Like many family operations, it’s not easy to spare one person when you’re mostly a two-man show.

This month’s theme is “Made Maternal” — a simple celebration of one of the most defining qualities of the breed, and this chain of events reinforced to me the importance of those.

A month or so later, I asked my brother-in-law how it was going, now that he was down to being the sole operator. He was pleasantly surprised.

Our young nephew stepped in to manage some of the night checks, and to everyone’s relief, the heifers had mostly calved on their own, with no assists.

Although Mother Nature delivered

its share of challenges in the form of record snowfall and regular snowstorms, the breed gave them an advantage in females that could get the job done without intervention, mamas who tended to their babies and fewer reasons for the cattelman

relegated to the house to worry.

Earlier this spring, I sat in Aaron and Sheyna Strommen’s kitchen, and that storyline was repeated. The extreme weather they lived through this winter reinforced the importance of the “essential traits” that Angus does best. They’ve invested a lot of themselves in their herd and their ranch, and you don’t want to miss their story on page 16.

Of course, much of the way a cow herd performs comes from the heifers you select and develop to become the foundation. In “Securing the Next Generation” on page 23, a few ranchers share their thoughts on creating and keeping the type of heifers that will be herd builders.

There are important reminders and tips throughout this issue, but the overall takeaway is that

breeding maternal cattle takes a long view. Angus cows are naturally maternal, but being a caretaker of that reputation requires more than

simply hoping the trend continues. It takes action by our breeders, in both data collection and reporting, and by paying attention to phenotype and

propagating cattle that carry those important characteristics on to the customers counting on them most.

I’ll leave you with this quote the Strommens shared on that visit. My favorite part of it may be that what was true 138 years ago is still accurate today:

“The work of breeding good animals is a work for a long time, requiring pluck, patience, a high degree of intelligence and a close practical judgment.”

— W.D. Hoard, 1885

That describes so many of the members I’ve met and I have no doubt they’re up for the task of keeping the maternal breed maternal.

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