

LEAD IN



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A crusty old farmer, asked by a neighbor if he was going to attend the "better farming" meeting in town the next day answered, "Heck no, I already know how to farm twice as good as I do."

Five hundred years ago Columbus became the first European to set foot on the Western Hemisphere. At least he was the first one to do it, realize he had discovered a new continent, then

return and tell Europeans about it. Columbus didn't discover the fact that the world was round. It had been known for hundreds of years. Others had speculated about reaching India or the Spice Islands by sailing west across the uncharted Atlantic. What put Columbus in the history books was that he used the information available to him. Others knew as much as Columbus, probably more. They just didn't use their knowledge.

Beef cattle breeders today know more than they ever have about their product, about what consumers prefer to buy and how to produce it. Yet some are like the farmer who stayed home from the meeting. They don't need a meeting to learn improved practices, they need a meeting on motivation.

Many an Angus breeder says, along with nearly every other cattle breeder, "When they start paying me for improved marbling and carcass quality, then I'll start evaluating my cattle for carcass traits." The problem with this attitude is that when producers are finally paid higher prices for carcass quality, the people who wait will be several cattle generations away from producing the cattle needed to fill the new demand.

Members of the American Angus Association keep more performance records than members of any other beef breed association in the world. Last fiscal year we reported and processed 347,855 weight records for birth, weaning and yearling. These records were reported by 2,781 members of the American Angus Association. That's impressive, but tempered somewhat when one realizes that 12,418 members of the American Angus Association registered cattle last year. Granted, some 8,855 members registered 10 head or less. But the fact is, thousands of Angus breeders know how to breed cattle a lot better than they are actually doing it.

On a broader scale, the entire beef industry knows the kind of cattle needed to increase demand for our product. Research done the past few years, combined with the National Beef Quality Audit completed in 1991 and released earlier this year, give us virtually all the information we need to do battle with poultry, pork, fish and tofu. It all boils down to three things: 1. decrease waste fat and

improve overall cutability, 2. improve taste by improving palatability and tenderness and assuring sufficient marbling, and 3. improve management by doing away with wasteful injection site blemishes, hide blemishes, reducing bruises, liver abscesses, dark cutters and the like.

For years cattle producers have tried to solve their problems by changing the USDA grades, by looking to another European breed that would save them, or by demanding that researchers come up with a magic wand that they can wave over a beef animal to tell if he or she will produce the most desirable offspring.

Changing the grading system in the 1960s and the 1970s only made our product less uniform and less consistent. Indiscriminate use of dozens of breeds of cattle by the commercial beef industry produced the most mongrelized cow herd in the history of U.S. beef production. And researchers have yet to produce the magic wand.

No, it is not lack of knowledge, or lack of tools, or lack of information that keep us from moving ahead at a faster pace in the beef industry. Rather, it is procrastination, and an unwillingness on the part of many U.S. cattle breeders to make the hard choices that would result in beef cattle that meet today's market specifications.

We, in the Angus business, also have a long way to go to make a high percentage of our cattle qualify for the Certified Angus Beef Program and to meet all the criteria laid down by the National Beef Quality Audit. We need more people on the Angus Herd Improvement Records Program and more people who are on it should probably take carcass quality more seriously.

But we can be proud that in most areas we, as a breed, are well ahead of our competition. Our carcass evaluation program and the carcass EPDs we have produced set us apart from all the rest. The same goes with the Certified Angus Beef Program. It is the most successful branded beef program in the country. It has set high standards for Angus breeders to shoot for. And more people every day are accepting the challenge.

Like Columbus, this increasing number of progressive breeders are willing to take the information and knowledge that we have available today and set sail, not knowing exactly where or when they will sight land. Yet they are confident that it is much better to be moving in the right direction rather than to stand on shore waiting for someone to develop a modern ocean liner that will easily, comfortably carry them to the desired destination.

