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Defining maternal

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I guess you could say the definition of “maternal” is, too.

For some, maternal is largely about mothering ability and how that heifer or cow cares for her calf following birth. For others, it is more about a look. They point to cows that are moderate sized, easy fleshing, long and smooth fronted, and big bodied. Some say the most important factor defining “maternal” is how well a cow adapts to her environment.

I’ve talked with others who point to the 14-year-old cow, maybe sometimes a little ugly, that calved at 24 months of age and never missed a calving season afterwards. That reliable old cow weaned a big calf every year and paid for herself many times over. For those they say, “Now that’s maternal.”

When we talk about the maternal side of the pedigree, we are obviously referring to the cows. Webster defines the term as “of, relating to, belonging to, or characteristics of a mother.”

I’m not sure that helps me get more clarity. I’ve heard it said maternal is a quality and not a quantity, which suggests many things that make a good cow cannot be measured.

My early years showing heifers and later judging livestock introduced me to terms like “femininity” and “broodiness.” They were subjective terms that described physical characteristics of a female that indicated how good of a cow she might be.

Length of neck and sharpness of front end were often ideal

characteristics we selected on. Yet I remember scratching my head when that fancy show heifer I had never amounted to much when we turned her out, but the plain-made heifers that would never have gotten a second look in the show ring turned into beautiful cows.

I’m sure not suggesting cows don’t need to look like females. I think there’s some really sound and time-tested “cowboy logic” behind many of the features we select for to predict how good of a cow a heifer may become. Still, I do think it is wise to be a little more descriptive when we throw around the word “maternal”.


As we discuss maternal traits, we are reminded that we are discussing lowly heritable traits — meaning many of the factors that determine maternal success are far more influenced by environment than genetics.

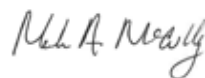
I’ve talked with some breeders who point to the economic index of \$M (Maternal Weaned Calf Value) and say it doesn’t match their definition of maternal. I think it’s important to first recognize \$M is in fact named Maternal Weaned Calf Value. When it gets shortened to “\$ Maternal”, it’s logical that confusion follows.

I also think it’s important to study the breeding objective behind \$M.

\$M, an index expressed in dollars per head, predicts profitability differences from conception to weaning with the underlying

breeding objective assuming individuals retain their own replacement females within herd, and sell the rest of the cull females and all male progeny as feeder calves. The model assumes commercial producers will replace 25% of their breeding females in the first generation and 20% of their breeding females in each subsequent generation. Traits included are as follows: calving ease direct, calving ease maternal, weaning weight, milk, heifer pregnancy, docility, mature cow weight, claw set and foot angle. Understanding these breeding objectives help you decide the importance you place on that index in your operation.

The beef industry looks to registered Angus genetics to contribute both maternal and terminal traits to advance the business. Most probably align on what the terminal traits look like; but with a term like maternal, it’s important to provide clarity around your definition of your breeding objectives. Not all see it the same way. 



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