

# The Real Magic

*The process of feeding a calf at home to become a success in the show ring isn't magic — raising a champion takes a great nutrition program.*

*by Megan Silveira, assistant editor*

Steer and heifer exhibitors alike are constantly searching out the secret ingredient to feed an animal worthy of the champ slap. Is there a potion to mix into the calf's water or a lucky feed pan to ensure a champion is being raised?

"There's not a magic feed," says Jason Cleere, associate professor in the department of animal science at Texas A&M University and extension beef cattle specialist with AgriLife extension. "It's about the nutrient and mineral requirements. You can put all the fancy stuff you want in cattle, but you can't make them perform over what their genetic potential is."

Cleere says the word "nutrition" is twofold when being applied to livestock. The first part of his

equation is the actual nutritional needs of the cattle.

"We know the average requirements for a certain weight of an animal at a certain degree of production," he says.

While there are average set nutritional requirements for bovine, Cleere says there is some variation from animal to animal, just like in people.

The other half of Cleere's nutritional equation is the feed quality. He says producers need to look at the type of feed they have and how they will be providing needed nutrition to their animals.

"The feed side is a little more exact. There's not that variation in feed like there is in the cattle," he explains.

The key to meeting the needs

of cattle is to find the balance between those two factors, Cleere says. This balance becomes crucial with show cattle specifically, Cleere says.

"When we think about nutrition from a show cattle perspective, what we're trying to do is take an animal and maximize its performance," he says. "We want its genetics to be at peak potential when we put it in a show ring."

Cleere says preparing animals for the show ring is like walking a fine line.

Heifers should be fresh and feminine but not overly conditioned, and steers should have met the target weight set for them.

Cleere's biggest piece of advice for people feeding show calves is to remember at the end of the day, these animals have virtually the same nutritional needs as all other cattle.

"When you throw the show into cattle, people think they've created a magical beast," he says. "There's no magic to feed them to make them a champion."

The real trick to feeding show calves is the art of managing them, Cleere says. To find success in the show ring, he says exhibitors need to get their calves hitting key weights and monitor overall performance.

Cleere has several tactics he offers for individuals to help see if cattle are hitting their stride nutritionally. He says seeing performance changes in breeding heifers can be difficult, so he suggests taking pictures of females on a weekly basis and comparing the images to visually identify changes in fat levels. For steers, Cleere says exhibitors should weigh their animals on a regular basis to track progress made toward weight goals they have set.

When it comes to nutrition, Cleere says there are abundant resources available to help individuals create the best nutrition program for their show animals. He suggests reaching out to breed



associations or extension services for general management help. Talking to other producers is another great source of information, Cleere adds.

He recommends individuals do not blend information from various resources together, however. He says this can inhibit the effectiveness of the overall feeding program. Exhibitors should find a good resource, run with their advice and tweak those suggestions to fit their operation, he says.

Cleere believes the secret to success is to keep it simple. The magic of feeding a champion is in an exhibitor's ability to meet the animal's nutritional needs.

"My philosophy is to keep it simple. Stick with the science. We know how much an animal needs, and we know



what our feed is," he says.

There may not be a wand to wave over show cattle or a school to attend to perfect your ability to magically prepare cattle for the show ring, but Cleere assures producers there is science. He says by focusing on the

scientific side of feeding cattle and learning to balance the "nutrition equation", individuals can have their livestock ready to be on the receiving end of the coveted champ slap. **AJ**

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