

Good Udders Make for Good Mothers

Scoring cows helps guard against future problems.

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

“Why are we doing this, Dad?”

That question came sometime during 2001 when Joe Elliott’s teenage sons were helping him run a cow into a chute to milk her engorged udder.

“So you can remember why we’re going to carry this cow off to the sale barn when this udder gets straightened out. We don’t want to have to do this again,” Elliott replied.

That was two decades ago, and as the seasoned Angus breeder recalls the story today, Elliott notes one of those now-grown “boys” is back home on the Adams, Tenn., farm. Today the father-son team assign udder and teat scores to every cow shortly after calving.

It’s both a guard against increased labor and future problems in their own females, and part reputation management as a seedstock supplier.

“If you sell a guy a bull with bad teats in his pedigree and he keeps replacements, he’s not going to be happy if that gene pops out,” Elliott says.

Initially, the breeder collected data on his own pass/fail scale. When the Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) began including it as a measure to track, he adopted that system.

“We don’t have that many bad udders anymore. We just don’t,” he says, noting they treat poor udders like they do disposition problems.

“We just don’t keep bad ones around.”

This summer, the American Angus Association added udder and teat scoring as optional fields in Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®).

“It’s all about making functional cows for the commercial cattleman,” says Esther McCabe, director of performance programs. “You want to be able to make improvements for them, and udder scores are a step to creating trouble-free cows for your customers.”

Teat and udder scoring how-to

In AHIR, just under the birth weight and calving ease fields, there are two separate measures: one for

Figure 1: Teat score



Figure 2: Udder score



dam teat score and one for dam udder score.

“There is no optimal or right answer as long as the udder is functional and problem-free,” McCabe says.

“The most important thing is that the calf gets ample colostrum in them in the first few hours of life. We know that the antibodies from

colostrum must be absorbed before the gut wall starts to close in order to provide passive immunity. The effects of colostrum follow the calf through life.”

The Association has adopted a one-to-nine scale for teat size, where one is the largest and nine is the smallest. There is a similar one-to-nine scale for udder suspension score, with one being very pendulous and nine is very tight.

Eventually the current AIMS system will be converted to match, and the Association will help AIMS users who are interested in submitting historical scores.

“Teat size and udder suspension are highly correlated traits, and they tend to move in the same direction, but it’s not a one-to-one correlation,” McCabe says. “That’s why they’re being scored independently.”

Elliott looks for a smaller teat — big enough for a calf to grab hold, but small enough to be able to suckle well right away — with good attachment and a tight udder. The more pendulous the bag, the more likely a calf can’t empty it and they’ll have problems, he says.

The scoring is based on the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) guidelines, but unique Angus sketches (see Figures 1 and 2) should help members identify what it looks



like within the breed’s population, she notes.

McCabe provides a few quick tips for scoring success:

- Limit the number of people taking measures in a management group since it’s subjective.
- Score within 24 hours of calving.
- Evaluate the worst combined quarter for udder suspension and teat size.

Making mamas that stay

Data helps cattlemen make decisions within their own herds. Elliott says they have real-world experience that provides proof: now very few females leave the herd because of their udders today compared to 20 years ago. It also helps the Angus breed continue to improve on the maternal traits it’s known for.

The idea is to have enough records to develop a research expected progeny difference (EPD) and continue building a body of data that will inform future genetic tools down the road.

Those who submit data early will already be in a good routine, and “It’s just like any other trait that you submit information on; you want your animals represented in that population,” McCabe says.

Elliott remembers his dad collecting weaning weights long before it was the norm, but he insisted the more they knew about the cattle, the better.

Today Elliott sees the udder and teat scoring as a small investment of time for the return.

“We’re tagging the calf. We’re treating the calf and giving a nasal vaccine. It doesn’t take long to get a score when you’re already doing all that,” he says.

It goes straight into the calving book, which is then entered into his computer each night.

“It’s about longevity, and it’s not just about appearance — it’s about function,” Elliott says.

A cow that gets mastitis once is more likely to have udder problems later on. A cow with a bad quarter will have a calf that’s shorted on milk.

He’d rather deal with a few more numbers to type in than to run a cow through the chute. That’s a lesson Elliott learned a long time ago. **AJ**

Editor’s note: Visit www.angus.org/University/Resources to view the Teat and Udder Scoring guide or contact the Association at 816-383-5187, and they’ll help you get started.