

The individual is paramount in Craig Sheppard's way of looking at the cattle business, his customers at CSA Cattle Co., their cattle or his own. That's one reason much of the Leoti, Kan., feedlot is devoted to relatively small pens — to facilitate sorting, both at placement and just before marketing.

Sheppard uses his individualistic ideas to enhance uniformity and profitability, holding that the key to greater consistency lies in analysis of the individual. To that end, he weighs each steer or heifer both in and out of his 2,500-head finishing operation, which was one of the first to partner with the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program's Feedlot-Licensing Program.

"With the individual weights, we can really start plugging in the yield values," he says. "Otherwise, you're just guessing based on average pen data." He sees those actual dressing percentages vary by 3%-5% within pens of cattle, the variation being greater when there is more spread in degree of finish.

Attention getters

"What you really notice is when you get the final numbers and plug the dollars into the equation," he notes. "You have these 750-pound (lb.) carcasses, and you see one that brought \$850 or more, and then you see one that brought \$550. That's when you start paying attention."

Data summary sheets led Sheppard and several of his customers to place more selection emphasis on a positive expected progeny difference (EPD) for percentage of retail product, he adds.

Sheppard works with several Angus seedstock producers and their customers, including his own 125-cow herd. Personally concerned with gathering individual performance and carcass data for retained-ownership calves, he says, "I want to walk the walk."

After a university degree and three years gaining practical



Each One Is Part of the Whole

This Kansas feeder says the key to greater consistency lies in analysis of the individual.

STORY & PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER



A true believer in individual identification, Craig Sheppard's own calves begin with ranch tags identifying sire and dam.

experience at the nearby 90,000-head Caprock Industries feedlot, Sheppard began feeding cattle on his own seven years ago and bought the CSA facility in 1994. It was a wooden-fenced 1,250-head-capacity farm feedlot harking back to the 1950s.

Sheppard immediately set about shaping an expansion area, building silos (for high-moisture corn) and dividing pens. By early 1998 he had doubled the capacity, using steel and new bunks. The feedlot has a waste-management permit for up to 5,000 head.

This is the fourth year for gathering individual data for sire-identified calves. Sheppard is also beginning to compare management and nutritional effects on individuals, including their response to high-oil corn.

To ensure ease of data tracking, Sheppard began using uniform feedlot ear tags a few years ago.

"We couldn't always read the ranch tags when we were trying to catch individual weights while moving them through our system, so we cross-referenced them. We like to have at least two ID (identification) system tags when they go to the plant." Now that he operates a feedlot licensed through the CAB Program, he relies on the CAB Program tags for pens of predominantly Angus-type cattle, green tags for the Angus types and orange tags for other cattle in the pen.

In the pasture

His own calves begin with ranch tags identifying sire and dam. Heifers calve beginning in late January; the main herd, from mid-March to mid-April, with weaning the first of September. Adjusted weaning weights were in the 575-lb. range last year. As usual, the bigger end went directly on feed, while the rest went to wheat pasture.

Sheppard uses artificial insemination (AI) and calves heifers, so he is keenly aware of the need for functionality. He synchronizes estrus for initial AI, then turns in a cleanup bull

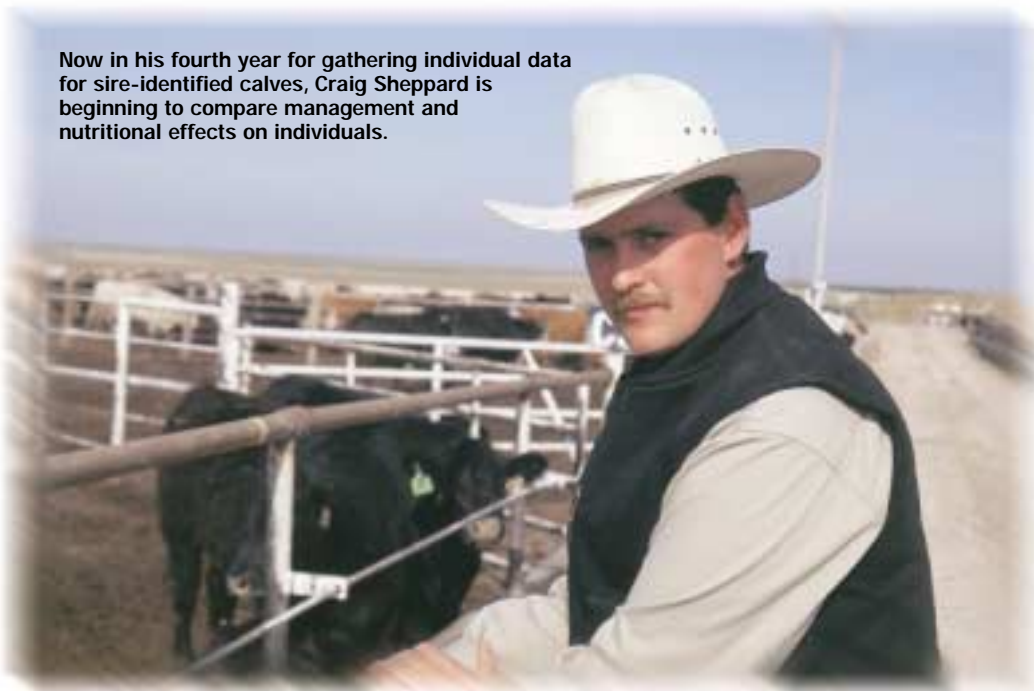
for 30 days.

Once calved, those heifers are in for a rare treat. "There is one time in a cow's life when she deserves the very best," he says. "If you believe in her as a replacement and she does a good job of getting a calf on the ground, then she deserves the very best for about 60 days [wheat pasture in this case]. But once she goes to summer grass, she's on her own."

Sheppard finds this window of pampering pays in that second-calf heifers do not lag behind the main herd in their calving dates. But there are no second chances. Some heifers still fall out despite this treatment; but more commonly the nutritional kindness is repaid by females that can settle several consecutive years to AI service.

Putting it together

Being experienced on both the cow herd and feedlot sides of the business, Sheppard knows that carcass data should



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not be overemphasized.

"When I look at carcass data, it is only part of the picture that helps me decide," he says. "The main thing I like about my situation is that I can

continuously evaluate my cows throughout the year, helping me to make better decisions on culling and sire selection, not just looking at weaning weights.

"When all of our 1999 calves were on the ground, the 1998 calves were just about ready to go out. It can really get your mind working if you see a cow's last-year calf lagging behind in the pen and then you see her runt this year," Sheppard says. "It's much more obvious in that case; you don't even need data."

Some factors are not so obvious.

"About three years ago a customer had Gelbvieh bulls, and one of them threw a nice ribeye, but the calves just wouldn't grade. After killing two sets of calves, we brought the bulls in for sonograms," Sheppard recalls. "What we learned in the cooler was rubber-stamped by the sonogram technician: 'Don't expect this bull's calves to go beyond high Select, no matter how long you feed them.'"

"With so much against that bull, he was culled from the herd because they knew they could find a better one," Sheppard says.

It's important to track individual cow performance by sire group where possible, he

adds. "If a sire works well on every cow except one or two, there could be a reason. The inverse is also true, in that if you know everything is all right with the cows, then the sire must be the problem."

The end product

Through individual feeding and cow management, Sheppard says the beef industry will continue to improve on efficiency. But there is another concern that deserves at least equal focus, he says. "How do we get the consumer to buy more beef? I'm scared of the long term if we don't figure this out in the short term, either by offering more convenience or quality."

Or in the case of *Certified Angus Beef™* product, both. The industry-leading branded beef program is a leader in value-added products and, of course, is famous for its steaks.

"We have friends from the cities come out here and they ask, 'Where did you get this beef? We can't get it like this in the city!'" Sheppard relates. "Now I tell them, if you want a good steak, don't try to buy it at discount. Look for a *Certified Angus Beef* steak."

