

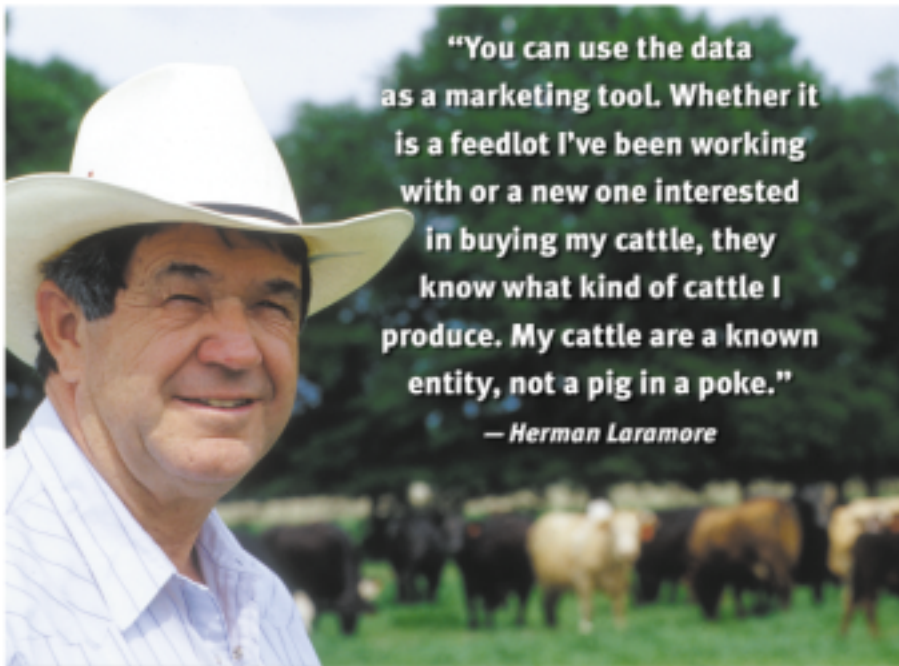


Cooperating
to Get Information

Data Now, Dollars Later

You'd best have feedlot and carcass data on your cattle if you want to compete in today's market.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**



"You can use the data as a marketing tool. Whether it is a feedlot I've been working with or a new one interested in buying my cattle, they know what kind of cattle I produce. My cattle are a known entity, not a pig in a poke."

— Herman Laramore

If you've been to a producer meeting or read a cattle magazine lately, you've heard it and read it — probably more than once. You'd best have feedlot and carcass data on your cattle if you want to compete in today's market.

That's old news for Herman Laramore. The Marianna, Fla., commercial cattleman has been collecting the numbers on his herd for nearly 15 years, and he's pocketing the rewards.

"You can use the data as a marketing tool," Laramore says. "Whether it is a feedlot I've been working with or a new one interested in buying my cattle, they know what kind of cattle I produce. My cattle are a known entity, not a pig in a poke."

Case in point: For years, Laramore has been retaining ownership and feeding his cattle at Tri-State Cattle Feeders in Hereford, Texas. However, last summer, representatives from Future Beef came calling. After looking at his six-weight calves and the herd's history, they offered him an almost unbelievable amount for the cattle. He obliged, and sold them all, with the exception of his replacement heifers and 160 head of calves sired by artificial

insemination (AI), which he sent to Decatur County Feed Yard in Oberlin, Kan.

The carcass data on the calves also gives him flexibility. He

breeds two-thirds of his Angus-Brangus females to Angus or Brangus bulls for replacement females and market steers. The rest he breeds to Charolais for a terminal cross.

These crosses consistently produce cattle that average 70% Choice and Yield Grade 2s and 3s. The finished cattle have been profitable selling on a liveweight basis. However, the carcass numbers tell him he could nudge them toward a quality-oriented grid without much effort.

"With the input of Angus into our cow herd, we're getting a higher quality grade," he notes. He does say, though, that he still needs to work on increasing the dressing percent.

Proving ground

Kansas State University (K-State) ag economist Kevin Dhuyvetter says Laramore is on the right track gathering the numbers on his herd, especially if he does move away from marketing on a live basis. "If a producer is going to market in a value-based marketing system or grid, the first and foremost thing he needs to know is what kind of cattle he has."

Laramore's penchant for collecting numbers has also made his herd a magnet for purebred breeders wanting to prove their young sires. In the deal, he gets free semen from the top reference sires in the country, as well as from promising young sires, while the breeders get useful information for their own operations.

As a result, this past season, he AI-bred 450 cows and heifers to top-quality Angus. "It is working great," he states. "I was already collecting carcass data, and I get replacement heifers out of superb genetics."

He adds, "I've learned genetics play a big role in performance, not just in the end results, but with calving ease, weaning weights, growth and performance in the feedlot."

In five years, he has seen the average weaning weights on both steers and heifers climb from an average of around 550 pounds (lb.) to between 600 and 650 lb., depending on grass availability.

He has also been able to compare his pasture-bred calves to the AI calves, side by side in the pasture and feedlot. "There is not a lot of difference," he notes. "I try to buy good bulls. There is no need of AIing part of your cows and using mediocre bulls to clean up the others."

On the other hand, he adds, "I've got some AI heifers bred back AI. That is when you really start seeing the difference."

Paul Hill, an Angus breeder from Bidwell, Ohio, has been supplying Laramore with Angus semen and says Laramore potentially has more rewards on the way. "In the future, Herman will be in position to take advantage of genetic evaluations of commercial cattle as they evolve in the industry."

Hill continues, "We can do ultrasound at the feedlot on the steers and ultrasound the replacement heifers right before breeding. Herman can make great advancements rapidly."

Hill says he is already profiting from the data he is getting from Laramore. "We find out early on if a bull's birth weight EPD (expected progeny difference) will hold in commercial conditions. We also find out if a bull will produce a good carcass."

He says Laramore's operation is custom-made for a young-sire testing program. "Herman does an outstanding job. He probably has one of the best-managed herds I've seen. In nutrition and efficiency, they are as good as they come."

Collecting data

Although the agreement is working out well for both Laramore and Hill, Laramore

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► Herman Laramore has been collecting feedlot and carcass data on his cattle for almost 15 years.

Want Data?

Are you convinced you need feedlot and performance data on your cattle, but don't know where to start? First, try your county Extension agent or state cattlemen's association. Many states offer feedout programs similar to Texas A&M University's well-known Ranch to Rail program.

If you'd like to go it on your own, start visiting with feedlots about custom-feeding your cattle. "The first thing is to try to work with a cattle feeder who understands your needs and who will work with you on collecting carcass data," says Ted Montgomery, West Texas A&M University. "Hopefully that is a feeder with a history of collecting data, like Tri-State Cattle Feeders.

"If you don't know a cattle feeder, give us a call, and I'll be glad to visit with you," he continues. "Most feeders do work with producers on collecting data, however."

He says it is cheaper and easier to get the data if you are having your cattle custom-fed. "If you don't, your cattle may get mixed in with another pen. Then, data collection becomes more expensive because we have to sort those cattle out."

If you do call Tri-State, manager Sam Kirk says he'll talk to you first about implementing a Vac-45-type vaccination and preconditioning program before the cattle leave your operation. Then, he'll ask you to clearly identify your cattle before they arrive at the feedlot.

Montgomery says this early communication with the feedlot is vital. "It is standard procedure in feedyards to cut out the old tag and replace it with a new one as soon as the cattle get to the yard. Specific instructions need to be given not to cut out the old ones, or if they do, to match the new tag to the old tag."

Kirk says they'll work with the cattle owner if they know he wants individual data. "We give that calf a 'social security' number and track him all the way through, provided the customer has an identification number," he explains.

He'll track performance and health on the calves from the time they arrive until they leave for the plant.

Before the harvest date, Kirk contacts Montgomery, who operates the Cattlemen's Carcass Data Service (CCDS), sanctioned by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). Montgomery and his crew then work out the details with the plant.

The charge for carcass data collection is \$6 per head, with a minimum of 50 head.

Montgomery stresses, however, that carcass data collection is not a sure thing. "We are guests in the plant," says the animal scientist. "Sometimes things happen that are out of our control. There will be weather problems, or a group of cattle go before they are scheduled. Sometimes there is miscommunication, but we try very hard not to let that happen."

He says they can even manage around lost tags at the plant. "If we have a copy of the original, usually we can go in there and recoup. Generally, once they get to the plant we can track them. The producers need to get a list and description of the ear tags, though."

Still, Montgomery warns producers that data collection is not a 100% guaranteed deal. "We give it our best shot, and 90% of the time we get it. If we don't, even though we already have expenses in it, if we miss their data there will be no charge to the producer."

Montgomery states, "Some producers get really upset, but if we do miss it, the best thing you can do is to press on and try again next year."

Editor's Note: The toll-free number for the Cattlemen's Carcass Data Service is 1-800-298-2687.

stresses that data collection, with the AI that precedes it, is not an easy task.

“AI is a lot of work,” he states. “It is cost-effective if you have the manpower and facilities, but otherwise it is not practical.”

Laramore and his brother, Gordon, both work off the ranch, but a three-man crew is at the 1,000-cow operation full-time. They have also built an extremely functional working facility, which helps when they AI. “We can separate 220 cows from their calves in 15 minutes,” he notes.

On the cost of AI, Laramore usually just supplies the heat detection patches and the labor. Animal scientists from the University of Florida often work with him on testing different heat synchronization drugs and

protocols, which cuts down on the costs but does add to the labor because of additional trips through the chute.

When collecting data, one of the full-time hands weighs and tags the calves at birth. He writes both the dam’s number and the sire’s name on the tags. Those numbers stay with the calves through the feedlot. Weaning weights on the feeder calves and replacement heifers are also collected on the ranch, as are yearling weights for the replacement heifers.

After a 45-day preconditioning period, the feeders are sent to the feedlot and the feedlot personnel take over the data collection. On the calves that go to Tri-State Cattle Feeders, the Cattlemen’s Carcass Data Service (CCDS) handles the data collection at harvest. The calves that were sold to Future Beef went to one of their cooperating feedlots, Decatur County Feed Yard, where

feedlot data was collected. Future Beef handled the data collection at harvest. That information was to be shared with Laramore.

Laramore is quick to warn any purebred breeder he works with that data collection is not a quick or easy process.

“From the time you breed the cow until you get the carcass data from the calf is approximately two years,” he stresses. “For example, we bred cows in January of ’99 and closed out in March of 2001.”

With timed breeding, AI conception rates average between 40% and 50%. On average, half of those calves will be heifers and will probably be kept for replacements.

Mix-ups do occur at the packing plant, and data can be lost or not gathered at all.

Still, Laramore says, “It is worth it if you are going to be in it for the long run.”



REFERENCE



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