

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

## If?

*Success is a journey rather than a destination or a prize.*

Have you ever set your eyes on a prize with the conviction if you can achieve that goal, then success, happiness and fulfillment will surely be the reward? Perhaps the prize was exhibiting a grand champion heifer, being selected for a varsity team, getting a job with a prestigious company, having several thousand followers on social media, being elected to a position of leadership or buying the new truck of your dreams.

All of the above are certainly fine short-term goals. Yet when achieved, do they deliver lasting satisfaction or create deep meaning? When I look back over my own experiences, I find shiny prizes once intently sought turned out to be highly depreciable.

Trophies gather dust, new trucks get dented, titles are fleeting, social media fame is an illusion and the pursuit of monetary gain has led many a person down a blind alley.

The “if, then” statements we conjure up to define what it means to be successful — to “make it” — are influenced by a multitude of voices and motivated by a host of factors. Our decisions may be motivated by our perception of the outward success of others, by being accepted or by the desire to win as a means to affirm our place in the world.

As a case in point, I wanted to be as successful in track as my dad, who won a state championship in

the sport in his day. Trying to be his equal influenced my decision to compete as a distance runner.

In the early days of my experiences in the cattle business, I was fascinated by breeders who were able to sell a “great one” for six figures, and that became my “if only x, then y” formula for success. There is nothing wrong with selling a few elite breeding stock for high value. However, it was not a sustainable solution for our ranch because it focused our attention on customers we were not well-suited to serving.

There have been other times when I was captured by the curse of comparison, which led to being focused on success metrics not aligned with true-north principles and did not result in lasting value.


Over time, my perspective regarding success has shifted from defining achievement as a destination to an understanding of the journey being the true source of fulfillment. The journey has provided wide-ranging experiences from joy to grief, plus the great blessing of fellowship with an eclectic community of friends, colleagues and acquaintances.

Somewhere in the midst of conversations with people who were grounded, authentic and intentional, I learned lives well lived had three common ingredients: a deep sense

of purpose, the desire to play for something or someone larger than one's self, and the ability to cultivate an abundant mindset.

These lessons have been gleaned from those who work in positions ranging from CEO to janitorial staff; ranch owners to pen riders, and famous to unheralded. Success, it turns out, is not measured by status, rank or achievement. Instead, success is founded in attitude, service, excellence in the task at hand, and the quality of relationships.

The lessons that have stuck with me were forged in times of challenge and hardship. While dreams of glory might have been the initial motivation to run, my track experience yielded only a few bits of modest recognition, with awards being long forgotten.

Yet in my first year of competition as a two-miler when I was the least talented runner, my goal became very pragmatic — finish every race. In those painful races, I learned to let go of comparison and confront my greatest opponent — the doubt, fear and resistance harbored within myself. Some 40 years later, I wouldn't trade that experience for a state championship medal. 

*Editor's note: Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.*