

by Mark McCully  
CEO, American Angus Association



## When optimum is better than maximum

*I believe most human beings are hard-wired for competition. We strive to win, and that usually means outperforming others and having the best or most of something. That competitive nature can lead us to adopt a philosophy — if a little is good, more must be better.*

While this drive, in and of itself, is certainly not a bad thing, it can hinder us from recognizing the difference between maximum and optimum.

Like so many in the business, my love for cattle was formed early in life. As a young teenager in the 1980s, I vividly remember my brother and I rushing to grab a newborn calf and measuring the

length of the cannon bone. At a time when value was largely determined by frame size, we were disappointed if we got a measurement less than 13 inches (in.). Looking back, it's pretty easy to see how silly we were.

That was the peak of the frame race, when bigger was better. Cattlemen were overcorrecting from the 1950s and 1960s, when the pendulum had swung to extremely small cattle.

A couple of decades later, the trends shifted to a type focused on improving the efficiency of lean gain. While the goal was correct, when we started selecting exclusively on frame size, the industry got itself in trouble. We were pursuing a maximum, not an optimum.

In animal breeding we tend to chase maximums. We propagate the extremes as a strategy in genetic selection. We identify outliers of the trait we want to improve to

maximize genetic progress. Maximums have extreme marketability in the seedstock business. Animals with “the most” of a certain desirable trait tend to command the most dollars.

“When it comes to cattle, I think of optimum as pounds produced relative to costs and value per pound. This balancing act can be difficult, and it's why selection indexes were developed for livestock producers.” — Mark McCully

### Favorable to some end

All of this leads us back to the dilemma of maximum vs. optimum. Optimum is defined by Webster as “the amount or degree of something that is most favorable to some end.”

Those last three words, “to some end,” are really important. When it comes to cattle, I think of optimum as pounds produced relative to costs and value per pound. This balancing act can be difficult, and it's why selection indexes were developed for livestock producers.


Selection indexes have several benefits. They allow for simultaneous progress of multiple traits. They help us weigh the value of our production output using assumptions of their economic value. Maybe most critical,

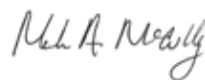
these indexes can incorporate the cost side of production.

Properly constructed selection indexes are an important tool to sort through the maximum vs. optimum dilemma and why the American Angus Association has invested in these types of tools for years.

The development of the maternal weaned calf value (\$M) index is a significant step to better characterize optimum production of the cow herd. While this tool is an industry leader, no one is going to argue that it is perfect. No breeding tool ever is.

As Angus breeders submit more records and grow the database around conception and fertility, mature weights and longevity, this index and others will better characterize cow production economics and improve our ability to identify optimum production levels.

In the end, probably the only things seedstock breeders should be trying to maximize are the bottom-line profits of their commercial customers. The Association is dedicated to building the tools to help Angus breeders do just that. 



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