



For Granted

► by **Eric Grant**, freelance writer

Riding that horse

I had a horse once named Sparky who liked to buck me off. He was half Thoroughbred and half Arabian — all head, legs and hooves — and every bit of him was ugly.

Culling parameters

One windy afternoon, he threw me on a steep hillside into a patch of oak brush for the last time. As I lay on the ground, trying to capture my breath, I remember listening to him as he thrashed through the brush — the dull thud of his hooves striking wet ground, the fenders of my saddle slapping his sorry sorrel side.

“Well,” John White said, grinning from ear to ear, anticipating even greater bloodshed to come, “you’d better get back on him.”

In retrospect, that was pretty stupid advice. Whoever came up with that saying about getting back on a horse that just bucked you off should be banished to Hades for eternity. Since that time, I’ve come to a realization: When you get bucked off a few times by the same horse, it’s time to get a new horse. End of story.

The same is true of the bull business.

Cow savvy

I can’t count how many times I’ve made mistakes with bulls or cows or bloodlines over the years. These bad decisions have not only hurt my pride, they’ve also affected my wallet. As anyone who’s raised cows knows, it’s tough enough to secure a profit in the cattle business under the best of circumstances, so why make it more difficult with cattle that don’t work?

So, last fall I became a hard-nosed culler of cattle. My new guiding principle is that there are no second chances for cattle that cause problems. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it’s probably a bad cow.

But the challenge I’ve faced is determining how best to set those culling parameters.

I have a good friend who maintains a short, 45-day breeding period. If his cows don’t get bred in that timeframe, they go to market the day the veterinarian determines them open.

Another friend of mine carefully analyzes

disposition. He works every calf into a pen by itself — a major feat, considering he produces 450 of them every year — and if anything blows snot, it hits the road. If there’s an identifiable pattern within a specific bloodline, sometimes the whole cow family goes to market.

Pretty ruthless stuff, but necessary nonetheless.

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Intestinal fortitude

The dirty little secret in this business is that culling takes guts. It takes information. And it requires the removal of your ego from the process.

Trouble is, when we all get attached to specific animals, we can get entrenched into

rooting for bad actors when they’re really just torpedoing any progress our breeding programs might be making.

It’s an awfully difficult proposition when you’ve paid good money for a bull or heifer only to find out they’re a money loser. The first impulse is always to find a way to allow them to stay, so you compromise your principles. But if you keep them around, someone will eventually pay for your mistake — and it will probably be your customer.

Like the Hippocratic oath, your primary obligation as a seedstock producer is, first, to do no harm. If you allow mistakes to continue to graze your pastures, you’re doing everyone great harm. Ultimately, the harm you’ll do will come in the form of a lost customer, something no one can afford to lose.

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Editor’s Note: “For Granted” is a monthly column written for the Angus Journal by Colorado-based freelance writer Eric Grant. The column focuses on marketing beef, the beef industry and seedstock in particular — aspects of the business that are often taken for granted as day-to-day tasks take center stage.