



# Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

## Great or disappointing?

*So, what does it take to make a cow great or disappointing? The answer, of course, comes down to the fundamental reasons why a particular breeder is in business. And, whether we consider a cow great or disappointing likely depends on our most recent experience. For the sake of argument, let's assume that we are a cow-calf producer who makes a living from the cattle business. Further, let's assume that the last 24 hours have been one headache after another. Thus, what is it that makes a cow disappointing?*

### A big disappointment

- She's higher maintenance than a pickup reading 250,000 miles on the odometer, which you know hasn't been hooked up for the last six months. Instead of working for you, she figures that you should be at her beck and call. There's barely enough feed at the local co-op to keep her going. The veterinarian knows her so well that he'd like to claim her as a dependent on this year's taxes. And, every neighbor knows her tag — given that she's crawled under, over or through every fence in the county.
- She has the production record of a bad investment. She has had several calves, but seems to struggle with getting them to weaning time. When she does, you have a better chance of winning the lottery than having the weaning weight of any of her calves within 150 pounds of one another.
- Before you let her out of the headcatch into the alley, the whole crew, including the kids, scrambles for higher ground. The dogs think of her as a World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE, formerly the WWF) steel cage match champion, and your daughter-in-law from Dallas, Texas, hasn't been back to the ranch since their last encounter.
- Despite your other time requirements, she demands your attention. You want to see your daughter play basketball; Bossy needs your help to deliver a calf. You want to make it to your son's seventh-grade concert; Bossy's calf needs help nursing. In short, she is a bovine designed to spring surprise after surprise on your already-chaotic life.
- Cowboy poet Baxter Black might refer to her as a "hard-doer." Comedian Jeff Foxworthy could do a five-minute

comedy routine about her life, and her image just seems to come up every time one of your city cousins asks, "What's the worst thing that's ever happened to you?"

### Great cows

While these tongue-in-cheek anecdotes are hopefully rare, it is critical that selection pressure is applied to both the maternal and paternal side of the pedigree. While each of us might come up with a different list of traits of great cows, allow me the opportunity to start the conversation with the following:

- Great cows are inherently fertile; they calve early in the season, year after year.
- It is easy to appreciate a cow with a great disposition — she's just maternal enough to whip a coyote or any other creature with the intention of harming her calf, but she won't crawl in the saddle or in the front seat of the pickup with you. She pays attention to her calf, pairs up without a lot of fuss, and when you give her the opportunity to make the right choice, she takes it every time.
- She always calves unassisted.
- Because she has functional teat and udder structure, her calf nurses easily and without any need for intervention.
- She stores energy easily and stays productive on a forage-based diet. She is simply an easy-keeper.
- At culling time, she has no strikes against her.
- She stays in the herd a long time and weans 10 calves by the time she is 11 years old.
- She is profitable.

### Intensify maternal selection

Herd improvement comes from two basic genetic forces — bull selection and cow culling. While the selection of sires is the highest priority due to the broader influence of a bull on the genetic makeup of the herd, cow culling shouldn't be overlooked as a key to fine-tuning and enhancing the overall net merit of a program.

My friend Dave Nichols says, "Love your wife, forgive your kids, and do neither for your cows."

Take the time to evaluate each cow in your herd: How does she grade? Careful analysis of each cow's ability to contribute to your breeding objectives will yield the information needed to make culling decisions. In the long term, objective criteria will be most effective in sustaining genetic improvement in a cow herd.

We are in a profitable phase of the cattle cycle. This is a good year to intensify selection pressure on the cow herd. Commercially bred cows continue to sell at premiums in most regions of the country. Perhaps the market is offering the opportunity to sell females who are closer to disappointing than great and to swap them for females that offer a better opportunity for genetic improvement. At the very least, we can maintain a disciplined level of selection pressure that assures the vast majority of our breeding herd never becomes the source of a Baxter Black poem.

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**Editor's Note:** Tom Field is a professor at the Colorado State University (CSU) Department of Animal Sciences, where he is responsible for the seedstock cattle breeding program of the university teaching herd. He directs the Seedstock Merchandising Team and teaches Food Animal Sciences, Beef Production and Family Ranching. He is a contributor to the research efforts of the CSU Beef-Tec program. A frequent speaker at beef cattle events in the United States and internationally, Field is also a partner in his family's commercial cow-calf enterprise, which uses Angus as an important genetic component.