

Branded Value



Commentary by **Landi McFarland**, 2004-2005 Colvin Scholarship Award Winner

Today's beef producers are facing an array of challenges — from national identification (ID) systems, to the closing of international marketplaces, to activist groups speaking out against livestock production. However, in my opinion, one of the biggest issues challenging producers is the customer's demand for high-quality, consistent beef.

American consumers are demanding value; they want to know the beef they buy will be consistent from purchase to purchase. Equally important, they are willing to pay for this quality and consistency. Therefore, branded beef has more value to the consumer.

Whether consumers buy Lexus vehicles, Nike tennis shoes or Whirlpool refrigerators, they know that different levels of quality exist at a specific price. The same is becoming true for beef. When a customer buys a Lexus vehicle, he knows the quality will be the same no matter if it is purchased in California or Iowa, or at a big or small dealership.

Likewise, customers want to go into a supermarket and purchase ribeye steaks just like the ones they bought last week. As producers, we must be able to market cattle that finish close to the same weight and are uniform in fat cover, ribeye area and marbling. What a challenge this is!

Consumers are realizing that buying unbranded beef at the supermarket (regardless of quality grade), can be highly variable. Unbranded USDA Choice or Select beef available at the supermarket is generally beef that has not met the qualifications for high-quality brands such as *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) or other branded products.

Quality branded beef products have not only gained acceptance in the marketplace, but they have thrived. This proves how consumers desire a quality product each

time they purchase beef. In the case of CAB, its longevity and tremendous demand confirm this viewpoint.

As stated in my extemporaneous speech at the 2004 National Junior Angus Show (NJAS), it is the eight rigorous qualifications for CAB that make this product so desirable. As beef producers, we must meet consumer demands to stay the No. 1 protein choice of consumers. In my eyes, quality and consistency are the No. 1 challenges facing the beef industry in delivering a desirable eating experience 90%-100% of the time.

The previous paragraphs outlined a tough challenge for beef producers. Now the questions are: How do we make the necessary changes? How can we produce cattle to better meet customers' needs?

First, I believe cattle producers are becoming more aware of the quality and consistency issue each day and are taking steps to better the carcass merit of their herds (hence the increased demand for Angus genetics). However, I feel all producers need to have this same commitment to quality so we can provide consumers with the most positive beef eating experience each time they purchase beef, not just part of the time. Producers must actively seek out the genetics to build up their herds' strengths and improve upon their herds' weaknesses.

Consider these tips

How do producers strengthen carcass merit attributes in their herds? Here are



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some tips I put together to help make the selection process of quality carcass genetics a bit simpler:

- ▶ Understand and use carcass and/or ultrasound expected progeny differences (EPDs) offered by breed associations to help guide the selection of breeding stock. If possible, select higher accuracy individuals (or individuals whose parentage has high accuracy).
- ▶ When possible, select breeding stock from herds that regularly ultrasound scan animals for carcass composition and/or carcass evaluate harvested animals. For some smaller producers, this may mean ultrasound information obtained at bull test stations.
- ▶ When looking at advertisements, sale books, etc., be cautious of ads that downplay carcass merit factors. Ads that do not include carcass merit data may not thoroughly select high-quality carcass animals in their programs.
- ▶ Although single-trait selection will grant the most improvement in the shortest amount of time, beware of the negative effects this can have on your herd.
- ▶ Ask questions! Request performance data of the individual, sire, dam and siblings to the animal(s) you are considering purchasing. If the seller cannot provide the data or answer your questions, you may want to rethink the purchase.
- ▶ Take time. Now that you have obtained all of the critical information for a purchase, take time to study the information, and make a well-informed decision on the best breeding stock you can purchase.
- ▶ Remember — genetic progress does not happen overnight. Carcass traits are moderately heritable. Genetic enhancement of carcass qualities must be a long-term commitment.

All in all, beef producers have many different demands upon them to deliver a desirable eating experience to consumers, but one of the most important challenges, in my eyes, is attaining consistent quality end products that meet customer demands. In recent years, beef producers have made great gains in carcass trait selection. Let's keep up the good work as we push forward into the 21st century!

