

Back to the Books

Pack your lunch pail, grab a notebook and pen and be prepared for what the next generation is learning about marketing cattle.

Story & photos by *Alaina Burt*

In the 21st century, education has come a long way from the reading, writing and arithmetic that used to take place in schoolhouses across the nation. If anything, education is now more versatile, with pupils learning in a variety of settings. It's no different at the campus of South Dakota State University (SDSU) in Brookings.

SDSU, South Dakota's only land-grant university, focuses on providing hands-on experiences for students, no matter their majors. For students who crave agriculture, cattle and marketing, the seedstock merchandising course fits the bill.

Each year beginning in January, Dick Pruitt leads the seedstock merchandising class, which encompasses just what it says: the marketing of livestock. Students handle the advertising, sale book production, customer interaction and sale management of the SDSU bull sale, conducted every second or third weekend in April.

Students bring to the course a variety of backgrounds; some reflect seedstock and commercial operations, while others have only limited experience in the cattle industry. Although this course merits only one credit toward a college degree, students gain experience that will last a lifetime.

The curriculum

"On the first day of class, I have students fill out a survey, and they have to rank what



PHOTO COURTESY OF SDSU

► Students in Dick Pruitt's livestock merchandising class gain hands-on experience, producing a video, sale book and flyer to advertise their sale.

committees they would like to serve on," Pruitt says. Committees are set up to handle all preparations for the bull sale. This past year, video, sale book and flyer committees were formed, while one person took over clerking and another handled the Web page.

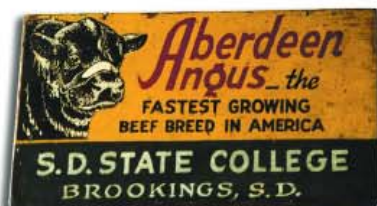
As with other bull sales, Pruitt has a schedule in mind for what needs to happen for a successful sale. "We have a timeline based on experience," Pruitt explains, adding that advertising should be "in print four to six weeks before the sale."

The first assignment

is for students to design a flyer advertising the bull sale. The entire class then chooses a flyer to use for advertising. Because the sale is late in the sale season, mailing the flyer to the prospect list in February is important to let customers know when the sale is and to provide information about the bulls.

For Kevin Vaith, who participated in the class in 2002 and is currently employed with the SDSU Cooperative Extension Service as a livestock Extension educator, designing the advertisements was enjoyable. "The class decided to use my ad, and it really gave me a

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► The SDSU Beef Cow-Calf Unit breeds about 130 females each spring, keeping 100 to calve.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SDSU

► SDSU students take a sale book quiz to prepare them for potential questions from customers.

sense of ownership in the sale when my name appeared on the flyer.”

With any advertisement, pictures can convey a tremendous message. In January a sample of the bulls representing various sire groups are washed and clipped for photographs, which are later used in flyers, sale books and on the Web page.

Throughout the years several groups of students have had an opportunity to take part in cleaning the bulls for sale day. Block and Bridle Club members have assisted as

part of a fund-raising effort. Members of the class have pitched in, as have employees at the Beef Cow-Calf Unit (CCU). Pruitt feels the effort put into preparing the bulls does return dollars, plus there are plenty of students available who like to clip.

“If that’s what gets students interested in what’s going on, and they learn something by being around, I’d say that’s a really positive deal,” Pruitt explains.

When it comes to publishing data in the sale books, Pruitt’s class chooses to “pick out the things that are the most important and useful to customers,” but, he notes, on sale day every piece of information is available to customers.

For educational purposes, a Web page and video are produced. As Pruitt reflects, “Every year I hope there is a brave student who is willing to tackle creating a Web page for the sale.” Pruitt has found it interesting to

see the increase in customers who prefer getting information on the bulls by e-mail or from the Web page.

Likewise, videos have been educational, yet have increased the scope of marketing. Video expands the area to which you might be able to sell cattle, Pruitt notes. “Video auctions have done exactly the same thing.”

In preparation for the sale day, students take an open sale book quiz, which tests individuals on breeding recommendations, sale book interpretation and overall knowledge of the cattle represented.

Vaith feels the quiz is helpful for students. “It was set up more to challenge us with questions that producers might have on sale day,” he explains. Ninety percent of the quiz is based on questions customers have asked in the past.

Mark Johnson is a former student of Pruitt’s who took the class in 1999 and now works for Producers Livestock Marketing Association and Credit Corporation. He feels that Pruitt administered the quiz so students would understand expected progeny differences (EPDs) and ratios. Johnson adds, “He tries to stress and teach us the importance of genetic evaluation of these kinds of cattle.”

► Pruitt’s students join together in January to wash and clip select sale bulls to photograph for use in promotional materials.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SDSU

Preparing the sale cattle

Merchandising cattle is only one side of the story, however. It’s impossible to sell bulls without the day-to-day work that takes place to prepare those bulls for breeding. The task of preparing, caring and handling livestock falls into the hands of the CCU, specifically Kevin VanderWal, manager; Anna Drew, assistant manager; and the crew, which is made up of four to six students. For these individuals, preparing for the SDSU Bull Sale is a full-year commitment.



► The facilities at SDSU’s CCU are set up in a manner for observation, not necessarily for running large groups of animals through a salering.

classes and activities at SDSU, as well as FFA, 4-H and collegiate livestock judging groups from South Dakota and surrounding states.

The facilities are set up in a manner for observation, not necessarily designed for running large groups of animals through a salering. Ben Dwire, a 2004 graduate of SDSU, worked at the CCU for three years and took the seedstock merchandising course this past spring.

“The cow-calf unit was also a good way for me to tie in what I was being taught in the classroom to a real-life situation,” he says.

Students who work at the CCU are diverse as well. Applicants vary, VanderWal says, but many are farm kids who want to be around cattle while they are at college.

“Students who work here are out here because they want to be,” VanderWal says. The students benefit from being exposed to a new way of doing things compared to how they do them at home, but VanderWal says he learns from their experiences as well.

The students play a key role at the unit, especially weekends and during calving, when they are in charge of checking the cows at night. Maybe it’s easier for students, VanderWal laughs. “It’s a lot easier to check calves when you haven’t been to bed yet.” Which is fine, he adds, as long as the job gets done.

“Having worked with cattle every day at home, it was important for me to continue working with cattle on a daily basis,” Dwire says. He had an advantage selling bulls this past spring because he fed and raised the bulls since birth through his employment at the CCU.

VanderWal has seen bulls sell since he started working at the CCU in 1989 and feels the seedstock merchandising class is “a real hands-on class. It gives you direct exposure to something real.”

With the time VanderWal has spent managing the cattle side of the sale, he’s seen several classes handle the sale and says nothing has ever really gone negatively. “Dr. Pruitt is a really good facilitator. He does a good job of leading students in the direction they need to go and then maybe letting them run a little bit from there.”

Limited auction

In the past, SDSU had sold bulls by private treaty, but in 1994 Pruitt “borrowed”

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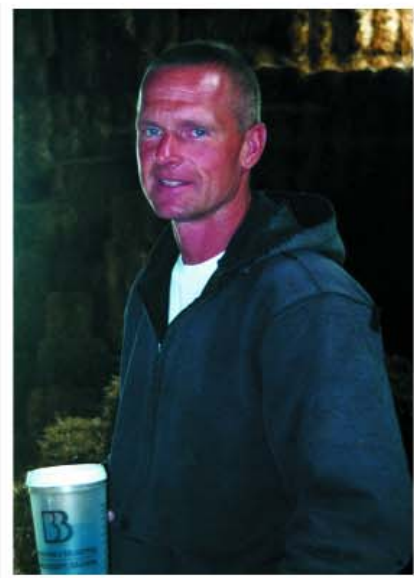
—Kevin VanderWal

the idea of a limited auction, thinking it just might be the way to encompass the need for student participation, smaller numbers of cattle being sold and working facilities ideal for displaying cattle.

“The biggest advantage is that it gives students greater opportunity to be involved and to interact with bull buyers,” Pruitt says. “It is designed to provide an opportunity to apply what they have learned from their courses to a real-world situation. While doing that, they enhance their skills in communication and teamwork.”

Philip Schmidt, who took the class and graduated in 2003, says he really appreciates the limited auction. “It’s a low-pressure situation,” says Schmidt, who now farms near Alden, Minn. “It’s a very straightforward, relaxed sort of way of doing it.”

SDSU’s schedule of events for a limited auction are comparable to any other sale, but with some twists. Cattle are on display at the CCU on sale day. Customers then fill out buyer information and list the cattle in



► SDSU CCU manager Kevin VanderWal works with students in the seedstock merchandising class to prepare bulls for the sale.

which they are interested. Cards are turned in prior to the start of the sale.

The auction then begins with the bull that the most buyers have selected on their buyer’s card. Cattle that are chosen by more than one person will be auctioned among only those people. Bids are in \$100 increments, and base prices of bulls are listed in the sale book. Students, professors and

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Bringing the lesson home

Mark Johnson took the idea of a limited auction from his South Dakota State University (SDSU) classroom to his family’s Angus operation in Pipestone, Minn. For years his family has sold bulls by private treaty. They realized that, with their limited numbers, it would be impossible to do a full-scale auction. Implementing a limited auction has worked well for them, and they have seen more dollars added to their average every year.

“It helped us to pick out a niche where we could compete being the size producer that we are,” Johnson reports.

Kevin Vaith put his education to work in his purebred cattle operation and Extension position, in which he works with livestock producers on a daily basis.

“Knowing that they don’t have all the same needs or wants helps me ask questions about their operations so I can better serve them,” he explains. The class helped Vaith learn to communicate with potential buyers through sale book footnotes and one-on-one communication.

Ben Dwire uses his education in a more indirect way. While his operation doesn’t market bulls, he does pay more attention to the process involved with the bulls he purchases. It’s made him appreciate the people who work hard to sell bulls to commercial cattlemen.

“I feel very comfortable going into a situation and talking to a person I’ve never met before and being able to carry on a very good conversation,” Philip Schmidt says. The class has given him an opportunity to become more confident in salesmanship and interacting with clients.

Garret Englin has improved his salesmanship by taking the class, which helps him with his day-to-day job. “You have to know the product that you’re selling,” Englin notes.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SDSU

►Pruitt's students can earn extra credit by providing the name of a new customer, as long as he buys a bull.

managers all have their say in pricing the bulls, which is determined by separating bulls into three groups and assigning base prices.

There are no cattle in the barn when it comes time to start the sale. The cattle are sold through use of an overhead and an identification (ID) number.

Students have an opportunity to educate potential buyers when visiting with them about the bulls for sale. Pruitt feels the time spent with customers is extremely important.

"It's a good situation for the buyers," he says, "and it's a great learning opportunity for students."

Vaith's experience in the class has added to his own marketing of livestock, he says. "I learned how to effectively communicate with potential customers and how to make recommendations based on performance data and EPDs."

For Garret Englin, beef specialist for Land O' Lakes at the Farmers Cooperative Society and a 2002 SDSU graduate who took the class his senior year, answering questions accurately was important. "If you don't necessarily understand a certain topic," he explains, "you should relay it or have someone go to an individual who's more inclined to know or has more of a grasp of what's going on."

Making the grade

Following the sale, students have time in class to reflect on what they learned from working with customers. Each year the class discusses what information was important to potential buyers on sale day and what type of bulls had the most value for the

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—Kevin Vaith

customers. This information becomes an important part of designing the breeding program.

At this time, grading also becomes a factor. Like any group effort, committees are based upon cooperation, communication and accountability. As Pruitt explains his grading system, he mentions, "The main part of the grade is each committee's self-evaluation of what the committee and individuals accomplished."

Students can earn extra credit by providing a name of a new customer that's not on the list. If that person buys a bull, they get the extra credit.

From a student's perspective, the class was a unique opportunity to learn, compare and have fun.

"It was definitely a fun class," Johnson says. "You didn't just do what you were assigned to do, you did more than that because everyone was having fun."

The class also brings together students from diverse backgrounds. Students represent a variety of segments in the agricultural industry, from feedlot and commercial cow-calf producers to large and small seedstock producers. Johnson adds, "Everybody could kind of learn a little bit from each other, too, and that has probably helped (me) just as much today."

One of the challenges of the classes was balancing everyone's schedule. The work you do outside of the classroom becomes extremely important in this situation, Englin says. "If you don't get something done, it may affect other people. There's a little more responsibility involved in it than just regular college courses."

