

Tracking Temper

The American Angus Association updates data collection options for scoring temperament.

by *Brooke Byrd*

Whether your operation is big or small, you've most likely heard of or seen one of *those* cows — the one you point out to your help as “Spaz” or sarcastically refer to as “Sweetie.” She's the cow everyone groans about when she enters the chute, and she's the one who can (and will) jump any fence, no matter how high.

Even if she's not wild enough to hurt anyone, she still causes difficulties for everyone who has to handle her or the calves to which she passes her nasty temper. From the breeder to the feeder to the packer, no one likes a wild cow.

The Angus advantage

Angus producers, however, have it pretty good. “Compared to other breeds, Angus cattle are probably better,” says renowned Colorado State University (CSU) behavior and temperament researcher Temple Grandin, “provided they really are Angus.” Past temperament studies in cattle at packing plants may have skewed results, she says, as “there's an awful lot of cattle going into the packing plant that are labeled ‘Angus’ that are not Angus.” With increasing desires for black-hided cattle, many breeds with past disposition problems are also increasingly black.

Angus seedstock producer Cam Cooper of Talon Ranch, Twin Bridges, Mont., agrees that Angus temperament has overall been good. “We haven't had a whole lot of problems,” she says. “Probably 95% of our cows have dispositions that are just fine.” However, she says, “we have had a problem or two.”

To avoid those few animals that cause problems, there are things producers can do to improve temperament, and the American Angus Association is streamlining data collection to help. At the September meeting of the Board of Directors Breed Improvement Committee, temperament



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data collection was expanded to include measurements on yearling cattle. The temperament scoring system from the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) guidelines will now be utilized, and existing cow temperament data will be modified to the new scoring system.

Previously, temperament scoring was included on the cow data sheet as an option to producers, explains Bill Bowman, Association vice president of information

and data programs. “In the past, it's just been more of a tool for a producer. He probably just jotted down the temperament on an animal — not necessarily recording all his cattle, but maybe using it to make notes on the bad ones.”

Sally Northcutt, director of genetic research, adds, “The previous system was just a flagging of some key managerial issues that a particular breeder might have, where we're

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► While it is important to have cows that are gentle enough to work with, CSU's Temple Grandin warns producers not to select against mothering ability.

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doing mainstream data collection now.”

Breed Improvement Committee Chairman Richard Tokach, Saint Anthony, N.D., says, “Historically, purebred breeders have found out about temperament issues either through trial and error or through networking with other purebred breeders.” However, the reliability of such information is often in question. The change in scoring should result in a more accurate and less subjective way to measure temperament differences within the Angus breed.

Cattle of convenience

With this change in scoring methods, the Association seeks to further utilize its research to promote what is considered a convenience trait. “With the size and scope of our performance program and our research and development, as well as our outreach into research that’s ongoing in our industry, we have the ability to explore new traits,” Northcutt says.

Bowman adds, “We’re aware of different trait evaluations that exist in the beef industry and trying to make sure we’re meeting the needs of the entire beef industry.”

This change in temperament scoring is also in direct response to the biggest segment of the beef cattle industry — those in their 50s and above, who more and more appreciate convenience when working cattle.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) 2002 Census of Agriculture, the average age of agricultural producers is 55.3 years, which increased from 54 in the 1997 Census. Jim Shirley, former regional manager and current Association vice president of industry relations, says, “As people become older, cattle temperament becomes more important to them. We’re not as agile, and so convenience traits become more important.”

Cooper, who advertises her cattle as having “quiet dispositions,” echoes Shirley, saying, “I’m not as young as I used to be, and I’m not as fast anymore.”

In addition to age, safety and labor are big reasons to pay attention to temperament. “There’s just three of us that handle the operation,” Cooper continues. “We just don’t have time to put up with a wild cow. ... I just won’t breed it into the herd.”

Grandin is also concerned about safety. “She’s going to put somebody in the hospital



Temperament scores collected on cows after they have been processed through the chute several times are influenced by learning, making data collected on yearlings a truer indicator of temperament.

if she’s really psycho,” she says. “If you think a cow is going to send you to the hospital, she’s not worth having.”

Physiological and financial reasons play into temperament selection for many producers. “Calm cattle are going to have better weight gains,” Grandin says. “The real flighty cattle are going to have more dark cutters and are going to gain less weight.” Grandin’s research at CSU has shown that the wildest cattle end up as dark cutters, which can be heavily discounted, much more often than calmer cattle.

Tokach says temperament is also useful for making your operation unique. “If you are a seedstock producer, then temperament scoring can serve as a real sales tool to target genetics to particular customers,” he says. To many cattle buyers, especially juniors hoping to show or those with small, family-run operations, temperament can be a big factor in purchasing decisions.

Even if your wildest cow happens to be your best producer, it’s important to weigh in these concerns. “You really need to ask yourself which is more valuable — a cow that weans a big calf or the health and safety of yourself, your family or your employees?” Tokach says.

Cooper agrees about the importance of such priorities. “We had a young cow —

fantastic pedigree, one of my very best cows as far as bloodlines are concerned,” she says. “But she was going to hurt somebody. ... So she’s not coming back here.”

Ease of collection

The changes in the Association’s temperament scoring system make collecting data much easier. By moving temperament data collection to the same time as yearling data collection, it’s a more practical time for producers to evaluate their cattle. “You have to work the yearlings anyway,” Shirley says, “so why not collect the [temperament] information at that time?”

Collecting at a younger age is also more practical in terms of obtaining the most accurate information. “The chute scoring is more accurate in yearlings than it will be in adult cows,” Grandin says, “because adult cows have learning involved.”

Northcutt adds, “It’s more effective to analyze the trait earlier in life when less selection has taken place and there are fewer environmental influences on temperament.”

The BIF scoring system offers more options to producers looking for more detailed scoring guidelines, she says. Cattle are given scores of 1 through 6, with 1 being the calmest and 6 being the most aggressive (see Fig. 1). “We’ve enhanced the scoring system to make it more producer-friendly,” Northcutt adds.

Practical application of the scoring system is also meant to save producers money in the long run. Tokach says it’s better to realize you have a bad-tempered cow early. “It is far better to cull an animal at a younger age than invest another year and then cull her after her first calf due to disposition problems,” he says.

Keeping out the crazies

While few people appreciate “Spaz” tearing up the place, Grandin warns against overselection. “Psycho cows we need to get rid of, but you don’t just want to select for the dullest, calmest. If you do that, you’re going to lose foraging ability and mothering ability,” she says.

Cooper gives her cows some leeway around calving time. “We may give a first-calf heifer a second chance. ... I’ll give them the benefit of the doubt for a year, but if they’re

honky and mean with their second calf, that's it."

Grandin suggests getting rid of anything scored a 5 or a 6. "I want to cull what I call the nutcases," she says. "This is a cow that busts gates, runs into fences, charges people, shakes the squeeze chute, tries to jump out the top — she's just berserk."

However, Grandin cautions producers that an animal can be acting up because the animal in front of her is. "You probably wouldn't want to cull an animal based on a single test," she says. She suggests studying an animal's behavior more than once to determine if she should be culled.

"The animals that are real nutcases, they tend to always be a nutcase," she says.

When considering temperament in culling, Grandin recommends that producers closely examine their operations. "Your perfect animal for the feedyard is not your perfect animal for a mountain ranch," she says. While most feedyards would prefer an animal scoring a 1 or a 2 that does little more than eat, "that's not your perfect animal to get out on the mountains and defend her calf."

"All producers have their own unique situations," Tokach adds. "The emphasis a particular operation places on temperament is going to vary."

Tips for scoring

One of the most important things when collecting performance data of any kind is to collect data within a contemporary group, made up of at least two animals of the same sex, Bowman explains. When reporting data, temperament scores for all animals must be included.

"The key is consistency," Northcutt says, adding that it's better if one person scores all the calves in the group to maintain consistency in scoring. "Just as you would collect all the yearling weights, you would score all the calves on temperament if you chose to collect that data."

The way you handle your animals is also important to temperament scoring. "It's really important that these scores be done with cattle that are handled quietly," Grandin says. "If you get out there and zap them all up with hot shots, you are going to change these scores."

In addition, your scores can also tell you more about your handling practices. Tokach says, "If all your cattle come through the chute with a 3 or higher score, then you definitely need to make some adjustments in your cattle-handling procedures."

Fig. 1: Temperament scoring codes

- 1 — Docile.** Mild disposition. Gentle and easily handled. Stands and moves slowly during processing. Undisturbed, settled, somewhat dull. Does not pull on headgate when in chute. Exits chute calmly.
- 2 — Restless.** Quieter than average, but may be stubborn during processing. May try to back out of chute or pull back on headgate. Some flicking of tail. Exits chute promptly.
- 3 — Nervous.** Typical temperament is manageable, but nervous and impatient. A moderate amount of struggling, movement and tail flicking. Repeated pushing and pulling on headgate. Exits chute briskly.
- 4 — Flighty (Wild).** Jumpy and out of control, quivers and struggles violently. May bellow and froth at the mouth. Continuous tail flicking. Defecates and urinates during processing. Frantically runs fenceline and may jump when penned individually. Exhibits long flight distance and exits chute wildly.
- 5 — Aggressive.** May be similar to Score 4, but with added aggressive behavior, fearfulness, extreme agitation, and continuous movement, which may include jumping and bellowing while in chute. Exits chute frantically and may exhibit attack behavior when handled alone.
- 6 — Very Aggressive.** Extremely aggressive temperament. Thrashes about or attacks wildly when confined in small, tight places. Pronounced attack behavior.

Source: Guidelines for Uniform Beef Improvement Programs, Beef Improvement Federation.

Planning for the future

Will Angus have a temperament expected progeny difference (EPD)?

While the Association is currently just collecting data, it plans to listen closely to producer demands. "We'll estimate the genetic parameters and see if it's worthwhile to calculate an EPD as a convenience trait," Northcutt says.

Right now, she says, "We'll continue to grow our database and answer questions as they arise. Long-range, if it's an issue and if

it's worth calculating a temperament EPD, then we would recommend that the breeder utilize the EPD and not try to use individual scores."

Until then, producers like Cooper will continue to run their operations as they always have. "We don't raise pets here. I just want to be able to walk through them and not be looking over my shoulder," she says. "I just regard it as part of a balanced product."

