

# Angus Talk

Outtakes and interviews from Angus Talk radio



## Tips for getting calves off to a good start

*Cattle producers have likely heard that calves never get over a bad start. We're talking with Ted Perry, a Purina animal nutritionist, who provides recommendations for giving calves a good start the first 10-14 days postweaning. That will minimize health issues and help jump-start calves.*

### **Q: Why is it so important to get calves off to a good start after weaning?**

**A:** If you think about the lifetime of a calf, the first six to nine months they are on mama and she's taking care of everything they need. After weaning, we have to get them onto solid feed. During that three- to four-week transition, we're setting up the rumen. We're setting up the calf's metabolic health and everything else to get off to that good start. If we do a good job with that and avoid sickness, we're setting the calf up for the rest of its life to be more efficient and to grow better.

### **Q: What's a good start look like for a freshly weaned calf?**

**A:** We want calves to start eating quickly. The quicker we get those calves to eat, the better for the rumen. Once the rumen takes off, that calf can replace the energy and nutrients he used to get from mom with nutrients from the rumen microbes. When we get the rumen microbes up and running, the calf's immunity starts kicking in and he can treat himself or protect himself against a lot of the diseases and things that calves see.

### **Q: Can bawling for extended periods cause a problem for a calf being weaned?**

**A:** A calf's natural defense is to bawl to get his mom to come save him, but when that calf is bawling, he's irritating the back of his throat. Consider when you go to a close football game, and you're yelling the whole night. When you get done, you feel that scratch in the back of your throat. That's the same thing the calf goes through.

When that calf is bawling like that, he's irritating the back of his throat and removing the protective lining. That's where the pathogens can take hold. If pathogens take hold in the back of the throat, we can start seeing upper respiratory diseases and other problems.



Ted Perry, a Purina animal nutritionist, says the first two weeks after weaning are critical in establishing calves' immune systems.

### **Q: So what's the answer?**

**A:** If you get calves to eat, two things happen. One, they don't miss mama near as much because they've got a full belly. Two, if they stop missing mama, they stop bawling, so we're reducing that pathogen load that can take hold. Once we get that calf eating, we're starting to feed the rumen microbes, and Mother Nature takes it from there.

### **Q: Why are the first 10-14 days after weaning so critical?**

**A:** When that calf is weaned, it's a very stressful situation. Mama's gone, and everything else is different. Just that normal stress drops the calf's immunity level.

The other reason the first 10-14 days is important is that once they start bawling and the pathogen load starts, it takes about 10-14 days from the time of exposure or stress till we start to see the calf break with disease. So, it's really a two-week race to get that calf on feed so he builds his natural

immunity vs. the pathogens and how fast they can grow.

### **Q: Are lick tubs a good option for a free-choice supplement for calves?**

**A:** We have found the lick tubs are a good source. Some calves don't want to come to the bunk; they're more timid. We may have calves that have never seen processed feed before. All they've known for food is mom's udder and grass, so they're not sure what that pellet is. They're not going to go right to it, but they will lick the tub.

You can put the tubs in the back of the pen, and the calves that are more timid will lick those tubs. While they are doing that, they're soothing the back of that throat; they're producing saliva to help buffer that rumen; and the lick tubs are providing sugars, proteins, vitamins and minerals to help the rumen digest whatever they are eating. Improving digestion will make the calf hungry and stimulate intake, so they will get to the bunk quicker.

### **Q: Does it make a difference what kind of feed is in the bunk to get them started?**

**A:** Certainly. When you look at starter feed, there's a couple of different things we need to look at. One is palatability. We know there are some ingredients cattle just don't like; they're not as palatable.

The unique thing about Purina is our research center. We've done more than 2,500 trials looking at feed intake and palatability. Everything — not just the feed itself, but each individual ingredient — that goes into our starter feed has gone through palatability trials, so we know calves will eat it and we won't have rejection at the bunk because of palatability.

### **Q: Is palatability universal? Do some cows like this and other cows don't like this?**

**A:** There are ingredients for which palatability is pretty much universal. There are always differences from animal to animal, but by and large there are ingredients that are more bitter. Interestingly, some of these ingredients we don't want to use in starter feed, but they're perfectly acceptable in finishing diets. Once calves are on feed, you can put those

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ingredients into a finisher pellet and have no problems at all.

During that first 28 days, when we're getting calves on feed, there are certain ingredients we want to provide — cottonseed hulls, for example. Cattle universally love cottonseed hulls. We've got to make sure we put plenty of those types of ingredients in our starter, and there's other types of ingredients that we just don't allow at all.

**Q: Why should Angus breeders provide calves a starter ration?**

**A:** If I'm an Angus breeder, I want calves to get off to a good start. Research shows if a calf gets sick in the feedyard, and it gets sick in the starting phase, the carcass value is lower, and usually a lot of that has to do with lung damage, liver damage.

A purebred animal we want to keep as a bull we want to live four or five years. In the case of cows, if we can get them to live 20 years and give us 18 calves in a row, that would be great.

If we damage the lungs and liver starting the calf on feed, that animal's never going to reach its genetic potential. We're wasting excellent genetics because we screwed up in that first month after weaning.

**Q: Is there a specific type of feed that works better for calf starters?**

**A:** We like to use the bigger pellets. Looking at a complete feed, if we use a bigger pellet or a textured feed, the calves go to it much quicker. If we're looking at a limited supplement, like our Stress Care™ 5, which is only 5 pounds (lb.) per day, then we can use a smaller pellet, but the pellet integrity becomes that much more important because with only a 5-lb. intake, everything's really concentrated

in that feed. If they're starting to leave fines, they're leaving a lot of goodies in the bottom of the bunk.

**Q: Are there types of feeds livestock producers should avoid?**

**A:** Yes. One is pellet quality with fines. Also, starter feeds are different than any other type of cattle feed. A lot of times we have calves on creep-feeders, which is a really good way of getting calves used to eating pellets and used to sticking their head in a feeder.

If you look at the nutrient composition of a creep-feed compared to a starter feed, creep-feeds are much lower in vitamins, trace minerals and other nutrients to stimulate rumen microbes. You really want a starter feed that's designed to start cattle and has the nutrient density to get those guys off to a good start, get the rumen bugs going, as opposed to just a grower feed or a creep feed.

**Q: Feed quality plays a big role in calf performance, doesn't it?**

**A:** Yeah, that's huge. When we talk about quality, it's not always about nutrient composition. It's also about the ingredients that go in from a palatability standpoint and a fines issue. Make sure we don't have fines in those creep-feeds.

**Q: How do Angus breeders analyze feed cost vs. quality? Is it the old adage, you get what you pay for?**

**A:** When you look at one feed that is a \$150 and another one is \$250, what we're really looking at is what it costs us per pound of gain. If I feed 15 lb. of starter and I get 3 lb. a day gain, that's pretty good performance. If I go with a \$150-a-ton feed that doesn't have the nutrient composition, I can feed them 15 pounds of feed and get 1 lb. gain per day. My cost of gain is higher with the

cheaper feed. We're really looking at cost of gain, not cost of the feed.

We know that intake is tied to health, so if I get a cheaper feed that the calves won't eat, not only am I not getting gain, I could very well get more sickness and get some calves with pneumonia and things like that.

I really need to look at cost of gain of the starter feed rather than the cost of the starter feed.

**Q: How can beef producers make sure their calves are aggressive at the bunk and getting proper nutrition?**

**A:** When you wean a group, you're going to have more aggressive calves and calves that are more timid. If we're feeding a 5-lb.-a-day supplement and high-quality forages, we don't want the big calves to get 10 pounds and the less aggressive calves to fill on forage.

The biggest thing is to have a feed that is palatable that all the calves like.

Also make sure you've got plenty of bunk space. If we have a foot, a foot and a half per calf on bunk space and we spread it out over that entire thing, then all the calves can come up and eat and all the calves can get their part.

Still, it starts with a really palatable feed that he likes the first time a calf comes to the bunk.

First impressions are huge with starting calves, so we want to make sure we have a very palatable feed product, and also make sure we have plenty of room so that calves don't have to try to push their way to the bunk, especially in those first seven days.

**Q: If we do get off to a rough start during those first 10-14 days after weaning, is there anything we can do to improve calf performance?**

**A:** Every now and then you're going to run into a batch of calves that just get sick. It's important to make sure you've got a balanced wholesome diet to those cattle all the way through. I would extend the starter period or the time they're on that starter diet a little bit longer to help get that rumen up and running. If a calf gets pneumonia, I would keep them on the starter diet during that time because the starter diet has the nutrition to help the body heal and to help build that immunity.



**Editor's Note:** Hosted by Doug Medlock, the American Angus Association's Angus Talk radio show features conversations with industry personalities from across the country. The program is broadcast each Saturday at 10 a.m. CT on Sirius XM's Rural Radio, Channel 147. Outtakes featured here are edited.



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