



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program, University of Nebraska

Lessons from the NFR

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” — Aristotle

The Wrangler National Finals Rodeo (NFR) is a 10-round study in Aristotle’s characterization of achievement. Certainly there are go-rounds where one individual performer has a “lights out” moment, but it takes repeated, consistent success to win the average and certainly to win the World Champion buckle.

Bronc rider

One cowboy caught my attention at the most recent NFR — bareback bronc rider Kaycee Feild (and not because he uses an unconventional spelling of a good last name). Feild rode successfully in all 10 rounds with an average score of 86.05 (a standard deviation of 2.79) and a range of 90.5 to 82. He finished first in six rounds, added a second-, a third- and a fourth-place finish, and was only out of the money in Round 4. In essence, he put on a clinic!

Kaycee’s 10 go-rounds epitomized habitual excellence, and every ride was equal parts confidence, control and consistency. His effort serves as a great example of the application of discipline to achieve a

desired outcome. Even in a chaotic event where each horse represents a high level of uncertainty and where the environment is filled with fierce competition, excellence emerges when repeated, consistent skills are applied.

Sire selection

Will the same approach yield favorable outcomes when applied to sire selection? Excellence in a breeding program is never the result of a single decision, whether it’s the selection of one outstanding sire or a mating decision that yields an extraordinary progeny. Instead, excellence in a breeding program is the sum of many decisions (sire selection, culling, mating) over several generations that eventually creates a sustained and favorable outcome.

So, how to assure that such success is obtained? I am of the opinion that success depends on repeated, disciplined, consistent

effort — not very exciting stuff, but given that genetic decisions affect nearly every long-term outcome for cow-calf and seedstock producers, a structured approach is the key.

It would certainly be simpler if we could just identify one spectacular sire and expect nothing but profitable calves as a result.

Reality tells us this is a pipe dream. However, if we study history, there are examples where overly enthusiastic promotion of a chosen bull suggested that all of our troubles could be solved by using the anointed sire.

As much as breeding cattle is about logic, we can’t ignore the emotional element that introduces irrational behavior. For example, it would be difficult to find a cattle producer who hasn’t been

caught up in the moment of an auction and purchased a breeding animal that might have been best left to someone else. Genetic decisions need to be made in a dispassionate frame of mind. To create lasting success in a breeding program requires taking the longer road — there just aren’t shortcuts to excellence, especially with the slow production cycle of cattle.

Strategies for sustained success

Sustained success requires a strategic approach to generating desired outcomes. First is the development of appropriate selection objectives created within the context of the unique characteristics of a production environment. These selection objectives must be developed with consideration to the potential unintended consequences (i.e., too much production in one trait may yield undesirable outcomes such as increased input requirements or diminished

longevity). Finally, the selection objectives should balance the multiple traits that affect profitability at the ranch level and further into the supply chain.

Second is the incorporation of quantitative selection tools that allow for the identification of meaningful differences between potential parents. The effective use of tools such as indices and expected progeny differences (EPDs) creates both focus and increased precision if they are applied consistently and with discipline. Data collection and benchmarking on key traits, coupled with a process to continually evaluate progress and to make adjustments accordingly, round out the approach.

Taking a structured approach to generate excellence from a breeding program isn’t particularly exciting stuff. In fact, it might even be considered boring. But at the end of the day, in every walk of life, tenacious attention to detail coupled with the patience required to take a long-term view is the foundation of excellence.

Recently, *Sports Illustrated* named Pat Summitt, the head women’s basketball coach at Tennessee and Duke head coach Mike Krzyzewski as the sportswoman and sportsman of the year. Between them they made 11 trips to the final four before reaching their first national championship. Despite the setbacks, they continued to practice a disciplined approach to the game centered on the long-road approach of getting to know their players by understanding their hopes, dreams, joys and fears — all the while building approaches to winning games based on a detailed understanding of the strengths of their players in a collective sense. They resisted the temptation for the quick fix, and they never wavered on recruiting character, work ethic and competitive spirit.

Aristotle was right — excellence is a habit. Just ask Kaycee Feild, Pat Summitt and Mike Krzyzewski.

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