



Outside the Box

► by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

The decathlete

The Olympics have long been a fascination. The combination of competition, culture, international cooperation and the individual stories of athletes woven together create a dramatic story that goes beyond the imagination of the most prolific novelists and screenwriters. There are lessons to be found in so many places — gold-medal-winning performances, lost opportunities, moments of epic sportsmanship, and even failures in judgment and character. One event, above all the others, carries a lesson for enterprise leaders, decision makers and, yes, cattle breeders — the decathlon.

Doing it all

While most track-and-field athletes focus on a specialty — sprinting, leaping or launching heavy objects through space — the decathlete endeavors to excel in all. However, the decathlete also accepts that he will likely never be the best in the world at any one of the events. Rather, the athlete sets out on a course to optimize performance that yields a favorable outcome based on a multitude of metrics.

Neither ranching nor cattle breeding are one-event specialties; rather, they require the ability for decision makers to skillfully merge and integrate a multitude of choices into sustainable solutions for the situation at hand. They must meet not only the challenges of becoming competitive at the

herd and ranch levels, but to also create products that compete downstream in the supply chain.

Take the case of sire selection. A breeder could decide to specialize in one trait, yearling weight for example, and to direct selection pressure to maximize performance in that one specific trait. Given its high heritability and the selection tools available to cattle breeders, I am very confident that rapid change in yearling weight could be obtained. However, there would eventually be consequences to such a plan of action — reduced calving ease, declining reproductive rates and rising feed costs, for example. While the enterprise would have become more competitive in supplying high yearling weights to the market, its capacity to

compete in the “decathlon” would have been substantially reduced.

Successful ranches perform well in a number of categories — financial, productivity, resource health and talent development, to name a few. In the realm of ranch management, it is sometimes attractive to consider placing a lot of the eggs in a single basket — new equipment, more attractive facilities or purchased feedstuffs, for example. While any of these choices may be manageable in the short term, being incorporated as routine decisions would be sure to undermine the long-term viability of the ranch, ultimately rendering it less competitive in the decathlon.

Successful decathletes are able to systematically develop an optimal combination of speed, power, endurance and agility. Their training regimen is developed and directed to create an optimized outcome. They recognize that it will be tough, if not impossible, to win all 10 of the events during a specific competition. Thus, their training must assure that they meet baseline levels of performance in the events where they are least competitive while attaining superior performance in their areas of strength.

Developing breeding plans and selection strategies designed to attain world-class competitive status require attention on key economically relevant traits, effective use of selection tools to drive performance in some traits without undermining desired outcomes in others, and building a bull battery of individuals whose collective performance meets the overall goals of the cow herd. Where competitive advantage is completely dependent on the individual athlete in the decathlon, the breeder has the advantage of building a team of sires through artificial insemination (AI), natural service or both to create the desired outcome.

The unique difference between the decathlon and the realm of ranching is that at the enterprise level the skills of one individual are not likely sufficient to assure the growth and sustainability of the enterprise. The skills and capabilities of management, employees and specialized outside talent can be brought to bear to create value for the business. While the athletes must depend on

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Table 1: Results from the 2016 Olympics

Event	Ashton Eaton — Gold Medal Decathlete	Individual Gold Medal Performance
Running (seconds)		
100 meters	10.46	9.81
400 meters	46.07	43.03
1,500 meters	4.22	3.50
110 meter hurdles	13.80	13.05
Jumping (meters)		
Long Jump	7.94	8.38
High Jump	2.01	2.38
Pole Vault	5.20	6.03
Throwing		
Shot Put	14.73	22.52
Discus	45.49	68.37
Javelin	59.77	90.30

themselves alone, in the world of business, the opportunity exists to build a team of individuals capable of delivering the right mix of skills to be able to compete and win in the multi-event nature of ranching.

The decathlon is defined by 10 specific events, and while the key areas of performance within your enterprise may not total 10, a thoughtful analysis will most certainly yield a multitude of arenas where excellence is required.

Identifying the key traits of importance

in a selection program will yield a list that looks more like a decathlon or heptathlon than a single event.

To excel in these individual events, be they specific biological traits or key results areas of a business, requires that they be identified and that a training program be put in place to develop the capacity to generate optimal performance.

An intentional process of identifying the events that comprise your decathlon and developing a disciplined and rigorous

training program to attain excellence in them provides a framework to become world class.



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