



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, affiliate faculty member, Colorado State University

Keeping our eye on the ball

It would be rare for someone to have not heard a father or coach admonish them to “keep your eye on the ball.” A team’s season is defined by the accumulated number of opportunities realized and lost by the collective ability of the team to stay focused. Lost opportunities tend to whittle away at a team’s ability to win games and ultimately championships. On the other hand, teams that hang championship banners at the end of the year are composed of players who had the ability to keep their eye on the ball.

Father knows best

As is often the case, Dad’s advice extends far beyond the realm of sport or a backyard game of catch. The success of the cattle industry depends on how well the hundreds of thousands of people who work in the business of producing and processing beef do their jobs.

Successful cattle producers effectively balance short- and long-term needs when making decisions in both times of abundance and limitation. In so doing, they are able to manage economic pressure while creating products that meet the needs of both immediate customers and, ultimately, the consumer.

The industry has made significant strides in improving the quality of cattle and beef, and these advances are the direct result of people keeping their eye on the ball. Demand slippage that characterized the 1980s and early 1990s has been replaced with significant improvements in per capita spending for beef, injection-site blemishes have been virtually eliminated from whole-muscle cuts, product innovations such as the flat-iron steak have turned the chuck from market dog to value leader, and international markets are on track to move the U.S. back into a position as a net beef exporter.

These successes have positioned the industry to take advantage of the explosion in worldwide demand for protein. Unfortunately, past performance is no guarantee of future success. Thus, each participant in the industry must find the discipline and fortitude to keep their eye on the ball regardless of circumstance.

Admittedly there are a myriad of influences that conspire to take the beef industry’s attention away from the goal — volatility in market prices, rising input costs,

economic and political uncertainty, increasing hostility from activist groups, and industry infighting.

To be honest, history tells us that uncertainty and stress push people toward the path of least resistance. But before we choose the shortcut we must consider both the short- and long-term consequences of our actions.

For example, the temptation to reduce costs by buying a lesser bull is driven by a short-term savings of as much as \$1,500 per bull. However, that one-time gain is offset by the long-term consequence of infusing inferior genetic merit that will affect several calf crops.

Cutting corners in best production practices such as preventative health, sound animal handling, genetics and nutrition, to name a few, have the potential to undermine long-term success.

Integrity in uncertain times

So how do we maintain our commitment to excellence and our deeply held belief in the power of pride of ownership? History tends to be expressed as the story of larger-than-life characters — Thomas Jefferson alone in the upper room of a Philadelphia boarding house struggling to find the phrases that would fundamentally alter our view of freedom, General Washington as he stood on the banks of an ice-hewn river preparing to risk a Christmas Eve attack that would reinvigorate a fledgling nation’s citizens to stay the course, or President Reagan speaking on behalf of humanity as he commanded that the Berlin Wall be taken

down. Yet, in each chapter of the American saga, our success has largely originated from the effort, sacrifice and creativity of common men and women who refused to yield their integrity.

This truth was exemplified by the son of a rancher on Sept. 11, 2001. On a beautiful fall day, as the horror of the cowardly attacks on our homeland unfolded, I walked into a classroom of senior students. Nothing in my training or experience had prepared me to help my students understand and deal with the events of that day.

Concern, worry and confusion were on each face, and the tension in the room was palpable. Looking into their eyes, I offered that “there are no words adequate for this day and so I leave

it to your choice — we can have class as scheduled, we can try to talk through what has happened to our nation, or we will cancel class to allow you to call home or be with friends and loved ones.”

The room was quiet until a young man who would go on to serve two tours of distinguished duty in Iraq put us in touch with the heart of the American character.

“Doc, they (the terrorists) don’t get this hour,” he said.

So for that hour on that eventful day, America’s sons and daughters focused on building a stronger beef industry. Let us have the same conviction to keep our eye on the ball as we face the uncertainty of these days.

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