

# Put Quality in Their Background

Management practices and genetics have dramatic effect on quality grade.

by *Miranda Reiman*

**Y**ou can't change the past, but what happened makes all the difference when it comes to feeding cattle. In an industry of independent segments, genetic potential can be held back or derailed between ranch and feedlot.

The University of Nebraska compared cattle in a growing program to those placed directly on feed as calves. After 60 days in a drylot, 78 days on cornstalks and a summer on grass, the yearlings were finished to the same compositional end point. The effect on quality grade was dramatic: percent Choice dropped 50 percentage points, from 66.3% for the control to a dismal 15.7%.

"That's a tremendous reduction in marbling due to management factors," says Mark McCully, director of supply development for Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB). "There are steps that stockers can take to mitigate that effect."

Feedlot owner-manager Steve Peterson works with a number of backgrounding yards near his 3,500-head Lebanon, Kan., finishing yard. The CAB-licensed feeder says it helps to communicate finishing intentions.

"They kind of know what my goals are," Peterson says. "I want these cattle to have plenty of energy, which is very important if you're feeding cattle toward a high grading end point. You have to have a certain amount of energy to keep the marbling process going."

The majority of his cooperating backgrounders use the same nutritionist, which also helps as the cattle transition into the MPK Land & Livestock LLC feedlot.

"You don't ever want to slow down on nutrition, because it's costly to play catch up," Peterson says. "Once you stop that marbling process, whether it's stress or other factors, you've got several days to catch up. Sometimes you never do."

## Environmental factors

Gary Wickwar, a stocker operator from Goodland, Kan., says it's important to

keep calves in low-stress environments.

"When the calves first come in, we just handle them as easy and as quiet as we can and then try to keep them that way," he says. That starts by easing them up on grain and providing lots of quality hay.

"It's pretty nutritious, and the calves love it," says Wickwar, who also feeds corn silage with a high grain content. He aims for 2.25-2.4 pounds (lb.) of gain per day during backgrounding.

Retired Kansas State University (K-State)

Extension beef specialist Frank Brazle continues to background calves at his Chanute, Kan., yard. He agrees that getting calves settled and on feed may be the most critical step.

"They'll come in and stay in a feedlot pen for two or three days," Brazle says. "We get the bawl and run out of them." Then the calves are moved to a 10-acre grass trap.

"That's so they have a dry place to lay," he says. "Even when it's wet, if they've got a grass mat under them, they can be dry. They're not in the slop."



► "I'd rather buy a calf that hasn't had the implant and maybe hasn't been pushed quite to the limit," says Gary Wickwar, a stocker operator from Goodland, Kan.

Brazle says being in the pasture also gives the animals a little room to roam, thus reducing sickness.

"The spread of virus is slowed down because they're not in such close proximity to each other," he says. "It allows the viral vaccinations we give them to start building up tighter to protect those calves."

That typically results in a 20% reduction in sickness, Brazle notes. It's also easier to look over all the animals and catch those that aren't feeling well before visual symptoms of sickness occur.

"If calves get sick and they're not performing up to a pretty decent level, that will affect grade later on," he says.

Controlling parasites is a priority, too.

"If there are some worm problems, they can have a negative effect on performance," he says.

According to Oklahoma State University data, cattle that aren't dewormed give up marbling, too. In one key study, cattle treated on pasture and at the feedlot graded 56% Choice, but those never dewormed graded just 29% Choice.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 84

## Put Quality in Their Background CONTINUED FROM PAGE 83

### A changing industry

Much of Brazle's research during his 30-year Extension career focused on backgrounding, so he has watched the industry evolve.

"Most of us have figured out that on freshly weaned calves, it takes six to eight weeks and a health program to consider them solid enough for a commercial feedlot," he says. The chronic labor shortage at many feedyards makes preconditioning "critical," Brazle says.

Breed improvements have also shaped the stocker industry. "Cattle genetics have changed," he says. "There used to be just acres and acres of lightweight cattle, and they had to be backgrounded. The cows didn't milk as well, and the calves didn't have the growth."

Now, he says, the lighter-weight calves are often found in the "fescue belt" — from southeast Kansas to the western edge of the southeastern coastal states.

"Because of the endophyte fungus in the fescue, there is a little bit of retardant milk production, so calves available in that area can be lighter in weight," Brazle says.

McCully notes the American Angus Association has documented genetic improvement over time. "From 1985 to 2005, the adjusted yearling weight EPD (expected progeny differences) climbed by 175 pounds," he says. "That suggests the traditional methods for backgrounding Angus calves may need a little modification."

Wickwar says the heavier calves might be the better calves.

"We'd like to buy a little lighter calf to be able to put on more pounds, but the calves with the good genetics weigh 550 or 600 pounds coming off the cows," he says. Wickwar often buys calves from the same Montana source, so they have predictable gains.

"We don't implant them," he says. "They've got more value to the feedlot if we don't."

That observation is consistent with a South Dakota State University trial on implanting. Calves implanted there at the start of the finishing period, compared to a delayed implant after 56 days on feed, had a 15% reduction in premium Choice.

Brazle waits 30-45 days before implanting calves that come into his yard.

"I want this calf to get through his lower performance and work through health challenges," he says.

As a past CAB-licensed feedlot manager, Wickwar knows what the next person in the

chain is looking for. "I'd rather buy a calf that hasn't had the implant and maybe hasn't been pushed quite to the limit," he says.

Peterson says a known history can help set those limits.

"We try to maximize energy without pushing cattle too hard so they finish at lighter weights. It all depends on the genetics and the type of cattle," he says. "A lot of these cattle I have fed from the same herds for six or eight years, so I know how to handle them. I know how they respond to how hard they're pushed."

Peterson grows some of the top cattle at 2.5-3 lb. a day, and still feeds them 120 days in the feedlot.

Research shows supplementation on grazing programs benefits both the quality grade of those calves and carrying capacity of the land. Nebraska data found supplemented calves graded 67% Choice, compared to 51% on grass alone. The carrying capacity on that pasture also increased by 40%.

### Different way of thinking

"People who background and buy better genetics on the front end have a better chance of recouping their value by owning the cattle all the way through," Brazle says. Lately, he has been retaining ownership in about 60% of his cattle.

Peterson has been working with a Montana stocker operator for the past two years on a similar program. The northern producer gathers the cattle, backgrounds them and partners with MPK on finishing.

"It makes me more efficient because I can spread groups of cattle out without having



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to tie up finishing space with growing cattle," Peterson says.

Brazle expects the stocker industry to respond to higher corn prices by focusing on the differences between good cattle and poorer cattle.

"There will be more emphasis on performances, both the ability to gain and convert," he says. "Cutability and grade will have more value, too."

McCully says today's practice of assembling groups of calves over time may need to be revisited.

"Many backgrounders gradually purchase calves and put them on a maintenance ration, or the bare minimum, while they're gathering enough animals to turn out together," he says. "Any time a calf is put on a restricted diet, it hurts marbling."

The mentality of "feeding our way out of mistakes," will change, Brazle says. "We have to eliminate those mistakes. Cattle that don't have enough body or bone or have inferior performance are going to hurt us."

He figures the increasing input costs will send new or stronger economic signals back through the system.

"The feedlot boys are not going to want to buy those cattle that will not perform or convert. Then it's going to back up into the stocker industry and then to the cow-calf side," Brazle says. "Finer-bone, poor-performance cattle already have discounts in place, but they're going to get steeper."

Brazle says as input costs have increased, the price of better genetics remained fairly constant.

"I don't see high corn prices going away, so good genetics will be the only reasonable way to combat what we're facing," he says.

If that's the case, more high-quality genetics will pass from the ranch to the backgrounder to the feedyard. That will make it even more important to maintain their true potential.



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