

Beef Business



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Scouting Your Competition

If you regularly read this column, by now you know that I am prone to use my page in the *Shorthorn Country* to build some analogies tying together the things I know and enjoy most: beef cattle production and sports. As we start 2021, I feel that might be the best way to kick off this year of articles. Hopefully, those of you that aren't big sports fans don't find these topics too alienating or boring.

Before I found gainful employment in the breed association sector out of grad school, many fall Saturdays were spent either in the football stadium of my alma mater, or on the couch watching every game I could. Over time, the style and philosophy of offense in college football has completely evolved. Offensive strategy used to be focused on being stronger and more powerful than your opponent on defense. Plays were run from offensive formations with most of the 11 players close to each other, hoping to create space for a running back to gain yards. Passing the football was much less common across the sport, but there were a few coaches who built their strategy completely different than the norm. These coaches felt that if they spread out their players in formation across the field, then the defense must spread out to cover those players. Once you spread out the defensive players, there are more gaps and spaces for an offense to successfully gain yards and score points. As a kid, I remember watching coach Steve Spurrier at the University of Florida use this spread out type of offense. He won a lot of games and championships using this philosophy.

Because football coaches all want

to win games, they study film on their opponents, looking for weaknesses they can exploit with their game plan. Because football coaches are also good copycats, they find things from other teams to incorporate into their own playbook. Eventually, other coaches started adapting some of these new spread tactics to fit their team, and a revolution was born. Today, you are hard pressed to find a college football game where both teams aren't running some variation of the now commonplace "spread offense". The game was forever changed by some coaches looking for an advantage that weren't afraid to try something new.

The principles of scouting and evaluating those around you can easily be applied to our business. As a cattle breeder, I feel it is part of my responsibility to study what others are doing in their operations that I can incorporate into my own. By watching more successful programs, I have picked up some pieces that I can adapt and adopt to hopefully make my herd better. It could be a genetic line I have not considered using, a marketing tactic to employ, or a new twist on customer service after the sale. During bull sale season, I will read catalogs featuring every major breed in the cattle industry from breeders in every corner of the United States. Some of the neatest things I have learned have come from outside my region and from a different breed. If I stayed just within my realm of interest, I might not have ever picked up some valuable information. As a Shorthorn breeder, if you aren't spending some time studying outside of the breed, I challenge

you to do so. Identify some breeders in your region that aren't raising red, white, and roan cattle, but align with your goals and are successful. Notice what they focus on in their programs and see if you can find a way to implement something similar. You might surprise yourself with what you learn.

While it may seem like a fruitless endeavor to some to study non-Shorthorn magazines and catalogs, I can promise you that there have been things drawn from others that have allowed me to do my work for ASA better. Programs like the Genomically Enhanced Female Program were born from studying other breeds' similar programs and making some adjustments to better fit the needs of Shorthorn breeders. You will likely see some new graphics in bull sale catalogs this spring to help better educate buyers on EPDs and indexes. The idea was born from seeing a similar piece in another breed's leading bull sale catalog, and then adapted to fit the Shorthorn breed with input from the Genetic Evaluation Committee. While we all need to be focused on what is going on in the Shorthorn breed, looking out the window to see what those around us are doing can help us be even stronger.

This year, make it a point to learn something new from another operation outside your usual circle of influence. You don't have to go as far as changing your entire philosophy, but maybe you want to give your operation a "spread offense" type of rejuvenation. Even a small tweak or two might be just the adjustment you need to score a big victory in your herd in 2021. □