

Beef Business



Matt Woolfolk | director of performance programs

Maintaining Balance

The month of February is the unofficial kickoff of bull sale season across the country. I've developed a trend of talking about something related to bull sale season in the February issue, and 2021 is going to be no different. While maybe not a "facts and figures" based article, hopefully some personal observations can be insightful. I've had some breeders challenge me to "speak my mind" more often in this column. Maybe this piece will satisfy that request for a little while.

It's not a revelation to anyone reading this when I say that every cattle breed has traits or characteristics that they excel over the competition. Likewise, every breed has areas that would be considered a weak spot that needs improving. That is where the challenge of cattle breeding becomes fun: trying to improve shortcomings while not sacrificing strengths. As I look around the industry as a whole, I wonder if some of us are veering off that course. Every year, more and more bulls are marketed to the commercial cattleman with outstanding growth and terminal genetic predictors. I think the industry as a whole has done a really good job increasing and improving the growth and carcass merit of beef cattle. New EPDs and the acceptance of selection indexes allow breeders to move forward in selecting for these traits more rapidly than ever before. Those are good things. However, I think there has been a cost associated

with that movement. There are a lot of bulls sold every year that don't have what I consider acceptable structure, starting at the ground. Feet and leg quality is something that seems to be dwindling in our pursuit of "better" genetics. Maybe genetics isn't the only factor at play causing this to happen, as management could play a big role if bulls are pushed too hard. I'm not pointing a finger at one specific breed in this instance; I see it in several types of cattle. Bulls with poorer feet and legs don't hold up as long and have to be replaced more often, and maybe that is what some merchandisers want to keep their annual bull demand afloat. Is frequent bull replacement a cost of doing business that most commercial cattlemen are ok with incurring for the benefit of adding stronger genetics? If you were to ask them, I don't think a majority of them would answer that question with a "Yes".

Don't interpret this as me saying that selecting for higher performing cattle is wrong and that utilizing growth and carcass EPDs is a bad thing. Anyone that knows my thoughts on cattle breeding at all knows I am a firm believer in using performance data, EPDs, and indexes. I'm also a believer in balance. Completely relying on EPDs for selection is just as much of a mistake as ignoring numbers altogether. Lots of traits have numbers and EPDs we can use to help us out, but not everything can be counted or simply measured. Common sense and

good stockmanship can't be lost in cattle breeding, no matter what your breed or goal might be.

The Shorthorn breed does some things well that others seem to be sacrificing in their pursuit of improving terminal genetic merit. As a whole, I think foot and leg quality in the Shorthorn bulls entering the commercial marketplace is a strength that we can be proud of. Athletic bulls with good running gears last longer in range conditions and sire females that do the same. Putting a tightly suspended udder with proper teat size under that half-blood cow will further value her (and the breed as a whole) to the industry. I'm proud of our breeders that continue to emphasize these things in their programs. I'm even more proud of the ones who maintain feet and udder quality, but also want to push forward with growth and carcass genetic improvement. As long as we sell cattle by the pound or on a quality-based grid in this industry, these traits are going to matter. To keep a seat in the commercial marketplace, we as cattle breeders can't abandon any traits, no matter how great or small they might be to the operation. We can't abandon functional traits. We can't abandon eye appeal. We can't abandon data, EPDs and selection indexes. Cattle breeding is a messy puzzle, but the pieces always seem to come together for those that work hard enough at it. ☐

NEW-American Rancher Shorthorn Show

February 1 at 8:00 p.m. CT • RFD TV

February 2 at 12:00 a.m. CT • RFD TV

February 7 at 11:00 a.m. CT • RFD TV