

Bull Power
Purebred Bull Specifications: Stocker and Feedlot

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Purebred cattle producers, commercial cow-calf producers, and university professors get upset and out of sorts with stocker and feedlot operators for their negative attitude toward selecting superior breeding stock. The aforementioned groups cannot understand why a participant in the production chain will not stand up and applaud genetic improvement and then be willing to pay more for superior genetics.

The beef industry has to realize that stockers and feeders have had their most notable financial successes purchasing good weighing conditions and the results of someone else's bad management. In turn many of the real bad "deals" feeders can call to mind involved big, fleshy, heavy weaning calves that had superior genetics but no ability to perform in the feedyard or on pastures. These "superior genetic packages" often have very little immune system to prevent or recover from sickness and no compensatory gain available. Indeed it could be said that this type of calf has a negative compensatory gain and a predisposition to sickness.

Therefore, the cow-calf producer becomes bitterly disappointed when he is offered average or lower prices for heavy weaning calves. He then begins to question the practicality of paying for purebred bulls with high EPD's for weaning weight. Cow-calf producers must realize that if they are going to produce a new kind of product such as a heavier weaning calf, the traditional management techniques that worked for lighter weight calves will need to be modified. The heavy weight calves may need to be weaned and held on the ranch in order to have time for some immune system development as well as getting the "walk and bawl" syndrome over with before being sent to a feedyard. Cow-calf producers will argue that they can't afford to use these types of management techniques because of the resulting loss in weight that their calves would suffer during this period. They are right-- it's also the same reason they are being bid less money for their calves by stocker operators and cattle feeders.

This dilemma can be resolved to almost everyone's satisfaction. In many cases, the selection process that has produced heavier weaning calves has only emphasized weight and not composition. Weight was increased as frame size was increased because dual purpose breeds were used to increase frame size. Thus, many heavy milking cows produced heavy weight calves. If selection were directed to a greater degree toward the amount of muscle that is present in the weaned calf, heavier weights can be achieved and still produce calves with the ability to go into the feedyard and maintain acceptable rates of gain and feed conversion. The conversion ratios of feed to muscle versus feed to fat will help these cattle perform in the feedyard. The heavy muscled, heavy weaning weight calves might not gain much faster than other

calves, but feed conversion should be significantly better. We know from economic analysis that feed conversion is several times more important in calculating bottom line profit than is average daily gain. The resulting calf has more appeal to the packer buyer when the feeding period is over because a higher percentage of the live weight is available for sale as closely trimmed retail cuts. We can begin to pass economic incentive down the production chain only if the product (calves) will perform to a greater advantage at each step in the production chain.

The bulls that will need to be selected at the purebred level in the marketing chain need to be evaluated for muscling as well as all of the other characteristics which will help other segments of the industry realize a profit. I not only do not advocate single trait selection for muscling, I would warn against it. I do however, strongly urge the purebred beef cattle producers to include muscling in their current selection schemes. In order to accomplish this, EPD's for muscling (ribeye area) will have to be developed on substantial numbers of bulls in the next few years.

The future of stocker operations will be determined to some extent by the price of feedgrains and the ability of grass to compete with the cost of gains in the feedyards. Stocker operations will be used to move lighter weight calves to heavier weights to make them more useful in the feedyards. Stocker operations will also help spread out the supply of calves to make them available on a year round basis to feedyards. Traditional yearling operations will come back into favor whenever high feedgrain prices cause cost of gain to be higher than selling price per pound.

In summary, selection should not concentrate on any one trait, but should include all of the economically important traits talked about today by this panel with a little extra attention paid to muscling.