

My concept of the ideal steer is much different than most. I do not believe that a steer of one weight, frame size, color, and fatness is what this industry is searching for. In reality, the situation is much more complex. No steer is ideally suited to perform well in all environmental/management relationships. Very simply, we husband cattle so we don't have to eat grass and grains. A steer is certainly of terminal intention; however, in our search for the ideal, we cannot forget that what we say about the ideal must also be indicative of, and practical to, sire and dam. I do not believe that the champion or ideal steer should fit the same mold in Mercedes and Portland. Cattle are obviously selected and managed in greatly contrasting methods, and our steer shows must reflect the predominant progression of breeds and types particular to environment, management and demand common to that area. Most of our arid and mountain range lands will not sustain consistent breeding cows which will have a calf that will grow up to be 58 to 60 inches tall.

From the packer viewpoint, the size our cattle can profitably attain should be controlled by three value determining characteristics: quality, cutability and portion size. Days of grain feeding and/or carcass fatness should be our concern in the assessment of quality. Steers simply cannot be so large that they will not have at least .30 inches of fat (opposite ribeye) at 1,350 lb. live or 850 lb. carcass. Conversely, steers must be large enough that they can weigh 950 lb. live or 550 lb. in the carcass and have less than .60 inches of carcass fat.

The insistence on a Choice quality grade with a desired fatness of .30 to .40 inches of fat or less is not realistic. Additionally, it is highly unlikely that commercial feedlots can long term afford to feed and kill cattle with less than .50 inches of fat. Extensive grain feeding adds weight and fat and cheapens the cattle as long as trimmable fat is not added in great quantities.

As carcass weights begin to exceed 850 lb., portion size becomes a major consideration. Let's take two examples for two weights of cattle:

wt.	850		550	
	<u>rib</u>	<u>top butt</u>	<u>rib</u>	<u>top butt</u>
cut	112	top	112	top
	<u>rib</u>	<u>butt</u>	<u>rib</u>	<u>butt</u>
yield to carcass	3.4%	3.3%	3.4%	3.3%
primal weight	14.5 lb.	14.0 lb.	9.3 lb.	9.0 lb.
portion thickness (8 oz.)	.50 in.	.60 in.	1.0 in.	1.15 in.

An 850 lb. carcass would yield a prime rib (112A) weighing  $14\frac{1}{2}$  lb. or a boneless top butt weighing 14 lb. An 8 oz. serving from either primal would be only approximately  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick. The same 8 oz. portion from a 550 lb. carcass would be twice as thick. When one dines in a white table cloth restaurant, he expects the steak or prime rib to be an inch or more thick; conversely, when one dines at a plate coverage type restaurant, he expects the meat to almost cover the plate and the potatoes to be crowded on the edge. The point I wish to make here is that the packing industry can utilize a wide variation in carcass weights (i.e., 550 to 850); however, carcasses much larger than 850 lb. will obviously have so large primals that they are very difficult to market. Cattle can also be too small. In a packing plant, slaughter and fabrication costs are incurred on a per head basis while the resulting carcass or meat is merchandised on a per pound basis. Slaughter and processing charges on an 850 lb. carcass in a typical packing plant would be \$9.40 cwt. vs. \$14.54 cwt. for a 550 lb. carcass. The fixed cost to the packer is 35% higher on the small carcasses. Accordingly, packers generally prefer to kill heavier cattle because more pounds dilute fixed costs to a greater extent during the slaughter and fabrication process. Meat packers have a diverse customer base; the retail trade actively pursues cattle in the 550 to 750 lb. weight categories while the HRI trade deals in the 700 to 850 lb. weight limits. Carcasses in the 700 to 750 lb. weight range are currently in greatest demand since these cattle fit most retail and restaurant demands for portion weight, size and fatness.

From a cutability standpoint, I believe our cattle should have .45 to .65 inches of fat. I also think our cattle should be predominantly yield grade 2's or low 3's. To accomplish this our 850 lb. carcass must have a ribeye area of 16 to 17 square inches and the 550 lb. carcass a ribeye area of 11 to 12 square inches. If we are going to kill heavy cattle, then let's make sure it's because the cattle are correct in muscle and fatness--cutability--and not just because they are 58 to 60 inches tall. Big for a reason is fine! In our search for size, however, we must remember that the small properly finished cattle are the most efficient in the feedlot and are also the highest yielding in our fabrication facilities.

I have tried to present the complexities that daily confront the feedlot and packing industries. The answer to how we put frame size, weight, fatness and muscling together is not the same everywhere in the country. The ideal or champion steer at Louisville and the Cow Palace need not be the same kind, but they must fit the demand and production criteria in that region. We are foolish if we continue to use frame size or height to performance test cattle in the show ring. My ideal steer is a muscular, properly finished (.50 in.) small, medium, or large-framed steer which will grow rapidly (consistently 3.2 lb./day) and which will make tender, juicy, flavorful beef efficiently. Beyond this we are fooling ourselves.