

Producing And Marketing Predictable Calves-My Way

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It is an honor to be invited as a participant in the 1994 Florida Beef Cattle Short Course. I feel a little uncomfortable on this program, since most of the speakers have PhD's or some long title with their name. However, your committee invited me so let's look at our program as we discuss producing and marketing predictable beef cattle.

First we need to look at where we've come from, so a short historical overview of Lovelady Farms is necessary at this point. The Lovelady family consists of myself, wife - Myrtle, sons - Butch and Milton; their wives and four grandchildren. Our farm is located in Central Alabama about 50 miles south of Birmingham and 60 miles northwest of Montgomery, Alabama. We are on the southern part of the upper coastal plains soil type and our soils run from sand and gravel to heavy red clay. This type land is suitable only for forages and trees. Our cattle operation started in 1949 with eight dairy-type cows and a purebred bull. In our earlier years we had cattle, hay and row crops as a source of income, but since mid 1960's our brood cows have been our only source of revenue.

Contrary to the fact that most agricultural economist will tell you that it is not possible to make a living with brood cows, we have been able to survive. Both sons obtained college degrees and entered the business world in the late 1960's and early 1970's leaving only Myrtle and myself as the sole labor force to run a 200 brood cow operation. We maintained this number of cows until the fall of 1988 when I suffered a heart attack. At this point, our son, Butch returned to the farm and we have obtained more land and this year we will be breeding 270 cows and 30 heifers.

Now enough of our background, lets look at how we produce our predictable calf. First let

me define my predictable calf: Our main goal in our breeding program is to produce a potential brood cow. This heifer is expected to calve as a two year old and have the potential to wean a 700 pound calf each year. We prefer her to be in the 5 to 6 frame size and mature at 1100 to 1200 pounds. She must produce enough total dollars each year to keep us in business. Steer calves are a by-product of our breeding program, but they must fit the beef industry needs to bring top prices at sale time.

Our nutritional program is designed to allow our cattle to express their genetic potential in terms of growth and milk production. This program is built around our forage program. The summer forages are bermuda grass, bahia grass, and dallis grass. All the summer forages are overseeded in the fall with ryegrass and arrowleaf clover. There is also some fescue and ladino white clover available in some pastures. The fertility of the fields are maintained to allow for maximum production. Hay is harvested off of around 150 acres when excess growth has occurred during the summer months. Hay is harvested in large rolls and stored in barns.

The cows begin calving around the first of November each year and are on free choice hay once the summer grass is gone. Beginning the first of January each year the cows are given 3 pounds shelled corn daily and calves are put on creep. This continues until the end of February when the winter grazing is utilized on a rotational basis.

Now let's look at the exciting part of the beef cattle business to me, which is the genetics. As we mentioned previously we started out with dairy cross cows, mostly Angus-Holstein crosses and used purebred

horned Hereford bulls. We creep fed the calves from birth to weaning and sold them as fat baby beef calves. In 1979 the steer calves were sold at 8 months old, weighing 750 pounds and brought \$.77 per pound. We were not able to keep a constant supply of Angus-Holstein crosses, so we purchased some purebred Angus cows in the late 1970's to produce our replacement heifers. The Hereford bulls were used on the Angus cows along with a Brown Swiss that was purchased in 1980. The Brown Swiss genetics were used for several years. We began using Simmental bulls in 1981, and have used percentage and purebred Simmental bulls since then. During the past five years, some Angus genetics have been added through a few purebred cows or bulls. I feel the genetics of an ideal cow for my operation is one that carries 1/2 to 3/4 Simmental breeding mixed with Angus. Some of our good cows still have 1/4 to 1/8 Brown Swiss breeding. After using purebred and percentage Simmental bulls for several years, we still have over 2/3 of the cow herd with 1/2 or less Simmental breeding.

The next challenging problem with producing a predictable calf is being able to find the genetics you need. Our bull selection process is first to look at the maternal genetics behind the bull. We look at the production record of his dam within a herd and usually select the bull calves prior to weaning. We use EPD's and individual performance information on the bull calves and their sires. We have used five bulls from one individual cow in our operation. We also look for heavy muscled, medium frame bulls with good conformation and disposition. Color and horns are not that important in our selection process.

Since we market the heifers that we do not keep in our herd as breeding stock, we are always asked how we select our own replacements. We have been keeping performance records on our herd through the Alabama Beef Cattle Improvement Association since 1981. Through these records we have identified the top bulls and cows in our operation. When certain cows are mated to proven bulls based on both parents records, the heifer calves are considered as

potential replacements. Final selection is made at weaning based on frame score and conformation. Cow families are real important in our heifer selection. One example of the importance of cow families is that in 1993, cow No. 89 produced the top weaning weight heifer in the herd at 728 pounds. Her 3 year old daughter produced the second top weaning heifer at 714 pounds.

Since we have discussed the nutritional and genetic side of our program, let's look at the results of the work in terms of production and marketing. As previously mentioned, we have kept individual performance records through the BCIA program since 1981 at which time our average 205 day weight was 528 pounds on 182 head of calves. This past summer our 205 day average weaning weight on 249 calves was 657 pounds with an average frame score of 6.3. The 133 steer calves from this crop were sold in early August with a pay weight of 740 pounds for \$.90 per pound. Our steers are marketed each year through a board sale with other producers in this area. The steers usually go to farmer-feeders in Illinois and usually go to the same feeder each year.

The heifers that are not kept as replacements are marketed to other producers. In 1981, we established a local county BCIA Replacement Heifer Sale to market good crossbred heifers. The heifers sold are selected from the top of consignor's herds and are offered in August each year. During the past 13 years a total of 1037 head have been sold and averaged \$140 per head over current market price. We sell our top 25 head each year in this sale and over the years we have had about \$40 per head advantage over the average sale price of the other calves in this sale. In 1993, we sold our top weaning weight heifer as the 1000th heifer to go through this sale. She set a record price for a commercial heifer calf in Alabama at \$1500. The rest of our heifers are sold private treaty at the farm following the heifer sale. Other results that our cow herd has obtained are the following:

- 95% calving rate
- 92% of calves in first 63 days of calving season
- Top Commercial Herd over 100 cows Alabama BCIA 1990,1992,1993 -- In top 3 in 1989 and 1991
- 7 of Top 10 cows on Alabama BCIA 1989
- 9 of the 23 Gold Star Cows - 1991
- 11 of the 46 Gold Star Cows - 1992
- 32 of the 100 Gold Star Cows - 1993
- Herd has been featured in "Progressive Farmer" magazine five times
- Was Alabama's nominee to the Beef Improvement Federation Commercial Producer Award

Now as I close, let's take one more look at producing the predictable calf. This year one of our steers accidentally missed the truck to the feedlot when we sold them, so we fed him at the farm for the freezer. We had the steer slaughtered on March 2, 1994. Dr. Bill Jones, Extension Specialist from Auburn, officially graded the steer with the following results: actual live weight 1310 lbs.; carcass weight 810 lbs.; fat thickness .35; kidney fat 2 1/2%; Ribeye Area 13.4 sq. in.; Yield Grade 2.5; Quality Grade Choice - and marbling score sm30.

We feel that our program is producing a predictable calf that is in time with the needs of the beef industry and remember we will have replacement heifers for sale in August 1994.

Thank You, Ralph Lovelady