

Black Ink Beating Expectations

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We may think about calving season as one of new beginnings, but it's really just part of a cycle that started at least nine months earlier and hopefully before that when breeding plans were set.

Done right, calves should be born into great expectations, and not just hope that the market will be up next fall.

It has been said that we can manage our vision of the future to avoid disappointment: expect nothing, get nothing, no problem. Some people maintain a philosophy that shuns anticipation. Live for the moment.

In politics, surveys regularly measure public opinions on issues and candidates so that when the votes are all in and tallied, we filter the score based on how reality fit the projections. A strong second-place finish can be more important than a win based on what we thought would happen. Spin doctors can manage expectations before and after a primary vote.

The cattle business works best when we invest more in what will happen based on our preparation for it. The more we make ready, the more we have at stake, the more we stand to win. Done right, second place is still pretty good.

These calves should achieve more than previous generations from this cowherd. We have reasons to expect that, from last year's genetic decisions, herd health program and nutrition, especially in late gestation.

How will we know if they achieve more? Weights, qualitative data and records. We will keep score.

Sure, some individuals will fall short, sometimes for obvious reasons but sometimes not. We can think about the accuracy of our predic-

tion tools, management and other variables, and probably make some adjustments to do better next year.

Keeping records from the moment they hit the ground, we still rely on maternal antibodies, and mothering ability of the herd has to bring them through their early months and into grazing. Perhaps there will be a late-spring vaccination schedule, or else a pre-weaning roundup, but then a start on creep feed or samples of their receiving ration will carry them into weaning. Then it's time for individual weights that will show increasing differences in calves we thought were pretty uniform.

After a bit of sorting, it's time for somebody to feed them. Again, it's better for the cattle industry if we keep some skin in the game, partner with a feeder or retain ownership and keep gathering information that shows how well they live up to our expectations. We can make targeted, corrective decisions based on what we learn in the feedlot.

Then it's on to the packing plant where the final scores are assigned. How did they do on quality grade and carcass value? When the boxed beef leaves the back docks headed for the meat cases and menu features, it's bound for the ultimate test.

We never want consumers to lower their expectations of beef, and there's no way to spin a disappointment on the plate. That's why we have to build up our own expectations for excellence at every step along the way that leads to that moment of truth.

It's time we expect more from our calves, and set the wheels in motion so that we have reasons to expect more. If we expect more quality, we can expect to support several million more cattle, many thousands more cowherds and cattlemen. Let's aim high. △

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