

# Black Ink Beyond Good Looks

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**N**othing better than looking at really nice cattle. Unless it's looking at them while referencing some really deep individual data.

Every cow is good at something, but in a few cases, the only thing they're good at is looking good. That's why we need records, unless money is of no importance.

Records should confirm those mature-weight guesses and, factoring in average weaning weights, point out the most and least efficient cows. Ear tag numbers should convey age at a glance, and the oldest cows have made us the most money. That's unless, again, we manage as if money is not important and let them stay regardless of whether they wean a calf each year.

Deeper data just goes into more detail on economically relevant traits. It's amazing what lies beneath the appearance and basics of weight and functionality.

Uniformity can make a big difference, often \$300 or more between calves at today's prices, and we can learn a lot by comparing weights per day of age. The less uniform a calf crop, the more we give up lot-size premiums at auction. If we sell direct, every buyer knows the value differences only widen after weaning and he must bid conservatively on uneven calves.

That puts a premium on cows with a record of steady to higher adjusted-weaning weight. It incentivizes tight breeding and calving seasons, too.

Maintaining excellent health is mostly management, but genetics may play a role as well. Those with records often debit a cow's total

points when her calves repeatedly turn up sick or dead after weaning.

Of course, sire influence is a huge part of herd genetics. Sorting cows by sire and calves by sire group can point out which combinations work best and which pull the average down. Ten years ago, studies showed at least a \$1,500 value spread between yearling bulls that looked about the same and weighed the same, just based on progeny differences at weaning.

That could be double today and taken another step, through finishing and into the packing-house cooler, it could double again. But wait, as they say on infomercials – there's more: if we keep replacement heifers, those differences could double again.

The optimum bull, chosen by his on-target estimated progeny differences (EPDs), registry and appearance, is a foundation decision. The unknown alternative bull can miss most progeny criteria, creating a downtrend in cowherd performance and quality.

Carcass data is a natural component of complete herd records, not just a maybe-someday luxury. Yes, the Choice-Select spread varies, but we have to aim higher than that to the more stable targets of premium Choice and Prime.

The most consistent, high-quality beef cow herds in this country have sorted carcass data by sire group and individual cows. They allow for outside factors of weather and sickness, but do not keep sires or their daughters that produce below-average progeny carcasses. That's why their calves, already off the charts that show averages, just keep getting better. They eagerly raise the bar because numbers show the way to more profit. △

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