

Crossbred Pressure Imagined



STEVE SUTHER

WOOSTER, OHIO

There I was, dreaming again. Maybe the topic came from thinking about my straightbred commercial cowherd a lot that day. The calves weaned as heavy as last year despite the drought, and they stayed healthy in the lot. The cows bred back to where I had to sell more just for age to make room for better heifers coming in that would intensify the best of my cow families. It was good for cash flow and genetic improvement.

That night I was going over the reasons for my breeding program. We have two pastures for cows with the younger, better ones kept near home so I can breed them artificially (AI) to highly proven bulls that improve gain and grade along with cowherd traits.

I started AI back in the 1990s and got serious about it after feeding my first pen of calves and getting as many Standards as upper Choice. Last year, they were all Choice or higher with 20% Prime. But since way more than half of my calves were heifers, and we have extra silage for backgrounding, I'm not finishing steers this year.

Maybe it's time to go back to blindness on individual quality and figure they are all acceptable on average; I can just aim for more pounds. Would that open the door to crossbreeding that many animal scientists point to?

Not for me, because the cow families are still the most important part of my herd, and there is no simple alternative that adds to predictability in my replacements. Using crossbred bulls on straight cows gives me a wider range of genetics in heifers, and some lines may match up differently with different crossbred bulls.

Yes, they might stay in the herd longer, but how does that help if I am less satisfied, if the consumer is less satisfied as we give up on beating 20 percent Prime? I would rather sell younger cows because I know my heifers are better.

I nodded off to sleep thinking I will go back to finishing steers next year and keep my herd on

its straightbred course.

But then the phone rang. Yeah: in my dream...

I thought, who uses the phone these days? They could have texted me or emailed. But anyway, expecting a corporate cold-caller raising funds for the less fortunate, or a vinyl siding salesman, I picked up to hear some kind of robo-call. It was trying to sell ideas.

Politics, I thought. Always politics this time of year. But it was about my cowherd, not my country. Well, indirectly it was about my country, because if I kept going down this road of straightbreeding, I was not being patriotic. This country's beef industry was built upon the concept that all breeds are created equal but different, and we must use those differences to our advantage.

Or be thought a pitiful fool, the robocaller said.

Don't ask me how a robocaller could know my cowherd breeding program – this was a dream, remember? And if it was already crazy, it got crazier.

The composite voice then said it represented some kind of Orthodox Bovine Church I was supposed to be part of, but apparently had fallen away from over the years.

There's great power in the proven science of hybrid vigor, and just as much in the dogma of complementarity, using variations among the equal-but-different breeds to leap ahead. Using one breed to chase herd improvement is the slippery slope to Hell, the caller proclaimed.

Oh, man. I sure didn't want to slip on any of what it was saying. But then I was in a pasture where anything slippery was easy to dodge, and there was no phone, not even a mobile.

There was just this uniform, straightbred herd that conventional wisdom was challenging. Were they eating my free lunch every day? Could I really earn another 4 percent per year, if only I believed enough in the system to stop believing in my use of data and in my cow families?

It made me wonder, in my dream. Then I woke up. Δ

STEVE SUTHER: Director of Industry Information/Certified Angus Beef LLC



Link Directly To: **PIONEER**