



Black Ink Sorting

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Low-stress cattle handling is becoming a mainstream practice, but have you ever thought about the ultimate low-stress sorting system – right from your computer?

Advocates of low-stress handling suggest using animal behavior to your advantage. If you've seen a demonstration of this technique, or employ it on your farm or ranch, you may recognize something fundamentally different than the sorting days of your youth. Flashbacks of dad loading calves in the stock trailer might include hollering, running, sweat, more hollering and perhaps even a few curse words. That's a stark contrast to the Zen-like approach numerous ranches and feedlots are employing now.

But today's technology allows us to take this one step further – just sort with the click of a mouse. It's not a high-tech, do-it-for-you method like auto-steer tractors (note: you'll probably still have to physically sort), but it could save labor down the road and put more money in your bank account.

It starts with individual data collection. Performance and carcass data, combined with reproduction records will provide what you need. The more years of information you have, the more effective this method can be.

Then it's time to sort the cattle. You need the right tools, and a hot shot or paddle are not on the list. It can be achieved with pen and paper, but to save time find a computer program that fits your management. It could be commercially purchased, available through Extension, or a simple spreadsheet.

Once all of the historical information is in the same place and format, there is no shortage of

ways to sort those critters. Profitability is generally most important, but for those traits you hope to improve that boost profits, look at what cow families and bulls hit the target. How you sort will depend on the kind of measurements you take. Number of live calves, calving ease record and average weaning weight can help you spot the good mamas.

Retaining ownership or arranging to get data back from a buyer will increase your precision. Analyze the top 10 percent or 20 percent, along with the bottom, and decide which genetics should be more prevalent in your herd. Simultaneously identify what combinations should get the cull gate. You can look at trends and compare to industry averages to make sure you're beating them.

To the technology wary, sorting in front of the computer may sound like more work instead of less, but think of it as a rainy (or scorching-hot or blustery-cold)-day exercise. The more time you spend picking genetics on paper or the computer, the more time you can save in sorting when you send cattle to the sale barn or feedlot.

The end goal of all this scrutinizing should be improvement and perhaps more specifically, uniformity. Sort the data first, increase uniformity and reduce sorting the live animals later.

Why?

A study of records on more than 25,000 cattle fed at the same yard over several years shows a range in carcass value of more than a \$450 from top to bottom. Selling at the auction barn, consistency is still king. Buyers show a preference for larger, more uniform groups, and the more alike you can make your entire calf crop, the easier it will be to deliver sale-topping groups.

Now that's something worth hollering about.

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