

# Black Ink : Toward The Ideal

STEVE SUTHER

WOOSTER, IOWA



**2**-4-6-8! Beef must differentiate! Sometimes we need a cheerleader; always, we need a game plan.

Why did beef come in second or third, behind other proteins on restaurant menus over the last few years? Why did consumer demand for beef begin to falter at the retail level?

If your calves did not top the market at auction, or set the top price for dressed beef the week they sold or bring home \$50 in grid premiums, you should also wonder why. These questions are all related.

Beef didn't lose ground to other proteins because of price alone, but because of its value. As all beef prices increased in this decade, beef quality remained flat or declined until its improvement this year. Consumers did not favor paying higher prices for the same or lower quality beef. On the other hand, high-quality beef is worth the money paid over chicken, pork or even lower quality beef.

Why should anyone pay more than average price for your cattle? We can't all top the market, but we can commit to making cattle that are worthy of that distinction. To the extent that we do so, we will have something worth cheering for, and beef will recover its place in the center of the plate, on menus and in the meat case.

Differentiate with genetics. Much of what can go wrong with cattle, especially weather and markets, seems beyond producer control. No matter what happens, your position is enhanced if your calves have predictable and consistent genetic potential for maternal, growth and carcass traits.

Management should maximize the genetic potential as much as economically feasible. You can enhance carcass value even prior to weaning, through adipocyte (fat cell) differentiation. Pre-adipocytes can develop into marbling to add value and taste for consumers, or they can go over to the dark side and develop into external fat. Much depends upon the level of stress and diet.

You can market cattle that stand out because

of their orderly identification (ID) system or better yet, enrollment in a source- and process-verified program. While individual ID programs are not mandatory at this time, the market increasingly rewards their use with dollars, and they help you track feedlot and carcass data back to the cow. Country of origin labeling (COOL) is becoming mandatory and may develop a related market premium.

Many of those programs dovetail with preconditioning and vaccination plans to ensure health, and some are commercial brand programs backed by enough advertising to help lift the value of your calves by association.

The "natural" niche is one of the fastest growing production and marketing channels, but it requires a great deal of attention to detail as well as integrity. When producers sign affidavits that affect their profit, they assume responsibility to exclude treated animals and, most importantly, to treat each animal that develops a health problem.

Producers once lamented that consumers think their food comes from a grocery store. Now that they know better, consumers want to know you better, too. They hear incredibly negative stories from anti-meat extremists, and sometimes they see a video to prove our world is not perfect.

Of course, the extreme few offenders give beef a black eye, but we can only heal it by continued good example. The beef cattle world has always been in harmony with animal welfare, but most producers can work toward still greater improvement. As we do, there will be harmony with profit as well. Research has shown higher net returns for everything from early castration to optimum nutrition, stress-free weaning and summertime shade.

Genetic selection requires a long-term view, because cows that work should contribute for 10 years or more, and their daughters that much longer. Our management of cattle and environment must look to that same long term, as consumers get to know more and more about what we do. If we expect them to keep us in business, what we do and what we produce must be worth cheering about.  $\Delta$

*Steve Suther is Director of Industry Information/Certified Angus Beef LLC in Wooster, Ohio.*