

Is a Cow Ever Too Ornery?

Cattle that routinely challenge the producer for space should be sold, and cattle that are very aggressive and easily put in a defensive mode should be sold.

Having worked cattle for years and too many sheep to count, one develops a feel for the rogue cow or calf. Maybe it is just a quick look or an intense stare. There also are those animals that you know are not going to have a good cohabitation experience.

It happened quickly: The cow was the last one in the chute and already had made several attempts to leave. The handling facility was solid, so leaving was not an option. She had tried to double-stack the chute. In other words, she tried pushing past the restraining gatekeeper and joining the cow already in the chute.

I heard three direct hoof impacts on the chute wall prior to her arrival in the chute. She was diagnosed pregnant. Keep or cull her was the question. That question, oddly enough, would be debated in many cattle circles. For those with adequate help, which includes agility in the job description, they might consider keeping the cow. For those who are more do-it-yourself types, the answer would sway toward culling her.

Maybe the answer comes from the partner. Cull her would be the answer if you ask the night calving crew or

Mom and the kids. Then ask yourself: Why is she still here?

The other day, the Dickinson Research Extension Center crew was processing weaned calves after I had been up to ultrasound the cows for pregnancy, including the cow with a bad temperament. One bull calf, with an obvious attitude, was restrained and processed. During the process, the calf started to shake with obvious signs of distress. The question was asked: What are the chances that the calf belonged to the cow that gave us so much difficulty earlier in the day?

Sure enough, that was her calf. Granted, not all behavior is that obvious. However, ornery cattle are just that, ornery; so they have no business being in the cattle population.

Is behavior or temperament passed from one generation to the next? Absolutely. Can producers select for mild-mannered cattle? Absolutely. Can producers control the destiny of their herd's attitude? Absolutely. Should the center castrate the bull calf with an obvious attitude? Absolutely.

Although the center castrates all bull calves, even as a steer, ones with a bad attitude can possibly mean bad feeding experiences. The question often asked is what to look for in an animal with a bad attitude. The answer is already there.

Cattle that routinely challenge the producer for space should be sold. Cattle that are very aggressive and easily put in a defensive mode should be sold. Cattle that are overreactive to the chute environment should be sold.

Nervous, high-strung cattle are obvious. One can feel the tense, nervous cow. A cow may be very rigid on the outside but literally shaking on the inside, so she needs to go.

With the upcoming bull sale season, ask questions on bull attitude and, for heaven's sake, don't buy temperamental bulls. Bulls that challenge the sales crew or, in the worst-case situation, the buyers never should be sold as intact bulls. Bulls with an attitude can be cut and placed in the feedlot well before sale time. Even cows that are overprotective at calving should be sold.

All the data in the world is negated once a cow or bull is identified as

dangerous to be around. However, some producers will disagree and some will mildly agree. There is that mysticism about conquering the wild and taming the untamable.

That being said, the stories make good reading but are much better as fiction than nonfiction. If the truth be told, the industry does not need cattle with an attitude. However, there is no one better than a cattle producer at finding a reason to not part ways with a favorite critter but, as a producer, you are never one of the herd.

Only two things exist in a herd: dominance and defense. In a normal herd, the producer is dominant, and there is an understanding that no cow, bull or calf will question that. Likewise, defensive plays also are prohibited. The herd understands that and, as a producer, you totally control what enters and remains in the herd.

Attitude is heritable. The bad can go and the good can stay. Practice good bull selection and strong temperament culling within the cow herd. If you do that, life will be better. **HW**