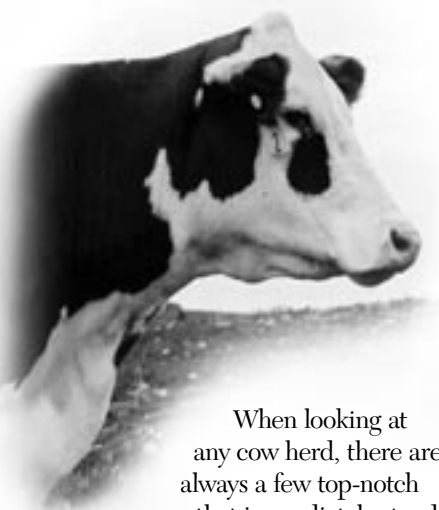


Identifying Cows that Contribute to Breed Improvement



by Bruce Gordon



When looking at any cow herd, there are always a few top-notch cows that immediately stand out. What is it that makes these females superior to their contemporaries?

After traveling the U.S. and Canada for nine years as a former sire selection specialist with Alta Genetics, I observed several commonalities among elite females in top seedstock herds representing all breeds. Here are just a few of those observations.

Phenotypically, the best time to evaluate cows is within the first couple months after they've calved. This is because cows are in their working clothes, and it is easy to identify which ones have calves that are more vigorous, fleshier and have a shinier, healthier hair coat than the average. It seems that the powerful performance cows also raise calves that have fewer health problems.

In addition to the calves they produce, elite cows — especially in colder climates — will begin to shed their hair coat and slick up sooner after calving than the average-producing females. This is an indicator that they are in-tune with Mother Nature and are getting into condition to breed back. Begin to watch for those cows that shed out first in your herd as they are typically your lead cows and will raise you quite a calf.

Along with the slick hair coat, I've observed several other visual characteristics commonly displayed by those females that are usually identified by breed associations as superior cows. Visual indicators of truly great ones include:

- A soft, loose hide;
- A lot of capacity from front to rear;
- Good feet, well-structured;
- No hair on the udder;
- A stronger foreudder that carries farther forward;

- Extra veining, especially along the lower body cavity and udder; and
- A big muzzle with large nostrils.

I call a cow with all of these characteristics a factory. Together these traits help cows be the mothers of great progeny that excel within the cattle population.

Females to avoid

I'd also like to mention a word about consistency. It goes without saying that a cow that consistently has one of the best calves every year and rebreeds easily is no doubt a superior female. But it is those females who are not carrying their weight that require some decision making.

My No. 1 rule is to eliminate problems. If cows do not rebreed, don't give them a second chance. Most successful seedstock breeders follow this philosophy. My list of types of cows to stay away from include:

- Large-framed cows.
- Shallow cows — look at the rib cage, if it isn't the deepest part of the body stay away from her.
- Narrow cows.
- Cows with excessive body hair for their breed type, both on the body and especially on the udder. Hair on the udder is typically a sign of a cow who is a poor milker.
- Extremely fat cows, especially in their brisket and around their pins. This is an indicator that somewhere along the line, they probably didn't have a calf or were overfed.

Environment and EPDs

A few final points: Within the seedstock industry there's always been a lot of talk about matching a cow to her environment. This is important in regard to frame size. Large-framed cows typically will not maintain themselves in

harsh environments — especially if they milk hard.

Some breeders try to match a cow's milking ability to the environment and seek out moderate-milking females, but I think this is the wrong approach. The best female in any environment is the moderate-framed female with above average milking ability because she'll typically produce a large calf and be able to rebreed and return to the herd for the following year.

I'm also not a big fan of creep feeding. I think it hides the inferior cows that are not pulling their weight in the herd. Without creep feeding, truly superior cows and their progeny are a lot easier to identify.

Finally, along with all of these visual tools, expected progeny differences (EPDs) are, of course, a valuable component for helping you identify superior cows. The new addition of stayability EPDs is creating more awareness of the bloodlines with longevity. However, often times by the time a bull becomes proven in stayability with his daughters he is long gone and so is his semen.

Within the last 10 years the industry has really begun to identify the value of genetically superior cows. These cows have been sought for donor females and brought record prices at sales, comparable now to their male counterparts. As we've selected more heavily for performance, the industry has drastically improved the quality of the cow herd and the artificial insemination (AI) sires. I believe a truly great cow is a factory. **HW**

Editor's Note: Bruce Gordon served as a sire selection specialist for Alta Genetics for nine years. During that time he traveled the U.S. and Canada purchasing and leasing elite genetics from several top seedstock herds representing all breeds. Today he lives near Sturgis, S.D., and can be reached at office@gordonresources.com.