



Shafer Responds

Editor's Note: Following is a "point-counterpoint" response by ASA Director of Performance Programs to Willie Altenburg's letter to the editor, found in this issue's Mailbag department.

By Wade Shafer, Ph.D.

Willie and I go way back as sparring partners. It actually started years ago when I first sat at his kitchen table and discussed the cattle business for hours. I was going to school in Fort Collins at the time, and he had just shown us Cactus Red on the side of his dam. We have been harassing each other ever since. Though we are in agreement in most areas of beef cattle breeding, there are a few areas where we don't see things eye to eye. Because it is so much fun to banter with Willie, I have to admit to purposely looking for things we don't agree on—he always makes me think.

As Willie expected, I do have some (umm... read many) comments. I know balance and avoiding extremes has been preached in beef cattle breeding for years, and in the spirit of full disclosure, I've never been wildly enthusiastic of the notion. I suspect Willie would use a sire in a heart beat that produced offspring that were extremely easy calving, grew like 90 to slaughter on minimal feed and maxed out any carcass grid while siring extraordinarily fertile, structurally sound replacement females that ate like a sparrow—who wouldn't?

Of course, I'm being facetious—such a sire does not exist. Because many traits are antagonistically related, the odds of winning the lottery are greater than finding a herd sire extremely favorable in every economically important trait. Consequently, cattle breeding is a game of trade-offs. In fairness to Willie's statement about avoiding extremes, since prior to economic selection indexes we lacked any objective criterion for applying selection pressure it probably was advice that kept breeders out of trouble.

That said, suggesting extremes in an economic index be avoided is akin to telling people to avoid extreme profit—and I don't know many people who would see extreme profit as a problem. Yes, it is true that besides being extreme for profit under API conditions, bulls like Wally and Big Sky are extreme in a few biological areas. So if we stick to the "avoidance of extremes" mantra we would have to bypass them. However, I don't see how the traits they are extreme for (longevity, calving ease and low maintenance) will get us in trouble when producing replacement females.

Sure, Willie is right on the money when he mentions going broke trying to sell Wally and Big Sky sons. Obviously, they don't pack enough of a wallop to trip most commercial producers' trigger. From a practical standpoint, the short-term solution to that problem may be to select high API bulls, but set your growth threshold

higher. There are certainly high API bulls with breed average or better growth.

From a long-term, idealistic standpoint, we may need a paradigm shift in this industry when it comes to the perception of what is profitable. Unlike our current array of EPDs, and other measurements breeders are prone to using, our indexes take input into consideration. The result is truly "balanced" selection. This balanced approach has identified sires that have been bypassed long ago because of being perceived as not having enough growth. The way I see it, the indexes are giving us a wakeup call—a call we should not ignore in my opinion.

The other thing I want to point out is that an interactive index is not derived by breeders setting their own EPD weightings*. An interactive index would have breeders inputting their own economic (e.g., grid prices, feed prices, pasture costs), biological (e.g., genetic level of cowherd, type and yield of grass, climate), and management (e.g., time of weaning, season of calving, labor available at calving) parameters. This information is used to determine how much weight to put on each EPD. This is how our indexes are currently developed, with the parameters we input being based on what we deem to be the average producer and economic situation.

Yes, I strongly agree that the best mousetrap is an interactive index and I can't wait for National Cattle Evaluation Consortium (NBCEC) to provide the industry with one. However, 1) I take comfort in knowing that unless a producer's conditions are extremely different from the norm (e.g., their grid is based on selling Kobe beef to Japan), our system should rank bulls close to most interactive indexes and, 2) I suspect the vast majority of seedstock breeders and/or commercial producers will neither have the inclination or information to make their own indexes. These two points are why I am at ease with putting out "one size fits all" indexes. To me it provides a much more accurate blueprint toward breeding profitable cattle than the alternative—shooting from the hip.

**You can set arbitrary EPD weights/thresholds with any type of index—whether it is static like our current index or interactive like the system being developed by the NBCEC. This is actually what I suggested doing for growth when it comes to the API (which is due to Dr. Lipsey working me over on the topic). Though this may be seen as a practical compromise, it is not the path to maximizing profitability. It would not be done in the pig or poultry business. ♦*