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Is Birth Weight The Most Important Performance Trait In Bull Selection?

Penton Research recently conducted a survey of commercial cattlemen from across the entire United States with results reported in a recent edition of BEEF magazine. These commercial cattle producers were asked to “check all that apply” from a list of 28 Performance Traits they required when purchasing their next herd bull. Leading the list of most checked traits were ACTUAL BIRTH WEIGHT and BIRTH WEIGHT EPD which were checked by 71.7% and 71.3%, respectively. Interestingly, the next most checked trait (weaning weight) only received a vote of 56.1%.

Does your Seedstock Supplier take actual birth weights on every calf; absolutely no guessing; with-in 24 hours of birth; with a dry calf; with accurate scales? Do they bother to collect birth weights at all? They should! In fact, you should demand that they do, or find a new operation with whom to do business.

As we visit with cattlemen at cattle events around the southeast are constantly asked about birth weights on calves sired by our bulls. Telephone calls and individual producer contacts also share those concerns. Mirroring the results of the above survey, many commercial producers want to know more about birth weight EPD and actual birth weight than any other traits. It’s an absolute that the growth or carcass potential of a dead calf doesn’t matter. Years ago Dr. Rex Butterfield of Australia was on a lecture circuit in the USA. Dr. Butterfield, in the most proper British accent you ever heard, always started his lectures with “I need to remind you that a dead calf has a distressingly slow growth rate”.

Many years ago, we began “FLAGGING” bulls in our Bull Sale Catalogs as “Calving Ease” bulls suitable to be used on heifers. To be considered by us to be FLAGGED “Calving Ease” the bull must have a birth weight EPD less than the Brangus Breed Average, AND an actual birth weight not over 79 pounds. That has well served both us and our customers over the years. So you can see it is “absolutely critical” that we get an accurate birth weight on every calf. We give you our word that we will collect as accurate a birth weight as humanly possible and we will do it correctly. As with many others, we have concluded that the only durable, dependable scale we have found is a “spring scale”. We use a Sunbeam-Stewart Farm’N’Barn Scale, I am sure there are others. The spring scale is actually very accurate and repeatable, IF it is properly cared for and calibrated frequently.



Our solution to calibration is pictured. We purchased a set of weights at a local Thrift Store for next to nothing. Since we wanted to calibrate our scales at something close to 80 pounds we used five 10 pound weights and one 25 pound weight for starters and then added a handle for ease of use. Then – the critical part – we weighed them on a scale CERTIFIED CORRECT by the state. Your local meat market has a “Certified Scale” and ours was certainly

accommodating. Now we know we have a “check weight” with an absolutely correct weight.

NOTE: We made two of these and thought they were identical, but they differed by 4 pounds. If you look close in the picture you can see that this one is marked and weighs 82 pounds.

Our current standard operating procedure is to check our scale at least once a week during calving; more often if we are having many calves in a day. We adjust the scale to reflect the “check weight” and we go back and weigh that check weight on the Certified Scale occasionally as well. We find that if our check weight stays in the shop or office and doesn’t get bounced around and abused, it doesn’t change.

Seems like a lot of trouble doesn’t it? You are worth it, or at least we firmly believe that you deserve an accurate birth weight on every bull you purchase. If a disaster strikes and we fail to obtain a birth weight we do not guess and we leave it blank; and we tell you it was not taken. In that case, the data block for actual birth weight will show NA for not available.

Interested producers can sign up to receive the popular Spitzer Ranch Newsletters. Their Newsletters always provide current Bull Test Performance Reports as well as educational tips, inspiration and insights into a wide variety of timely topics of interest to those cattlemen whose goal is making money in the beef industry. Just call 864/972-9140, write 1511 HWY 59, Fair Play, SC, 29643 or email spitzeranch@mindspring.com to get on a mailing list sure to put your operation in a position to be more profit driven.

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