

Optimum versus Maximum

Has our industry gone too far, *again*?

A few years ago, I wrote a piece about “optimal” birth weights as we had noticed our industry using so many “extreme” calving ease bulls. Much of the industry has now realized that there truly is an optimal level of birth weight, as ultra low birth bulls generally sacrifice survivability, growth, thickness, bone, and overall do-ability.

Now, we see a portion of our industry seeking maximum growth and carcass traits. We often see sale-topping bulls that are maximizing growth and terminal traits. Bulls boasting extreme \$C Values are now idolized like the extreme calving ease bulls of a decade ago. So what is the danger of high \$C? From our real-world, practical experience, we have found (as have many Angus breeders) there is a much higher fallout of these extreme growth and terminal-trait cattle than just good, solid growth cattle. What do I mean? We see more foot problems, increased structural problems, higher infertility, and a decreased “beef-type” look. Could this even be contributing to increasing levels of bovine congestive heart failure in what the USDA calls feeding operations of “well-managed, high genetic merit cattle”?

I liken this “optimum versus maximum” debate to my dad’s General Lee car. The souped-up engine in this car has some 700+ horse power. It’s a great thing to have if you are racing on the Bonneville Salt Flats, but for Tingley, Iowa, it’s not real practical. In fact, the General Lee overheats when doing a basic task, like driving in a parade – the engine wasn’t built for going 2 mph, it built for extreme speed. My farm truck would get smoked by the General Lee on the Salt Flats, but my truck gets me where I need to go 365 days a year on the farm. No matter if it is on ice, in mud, driving slow walking cows down the road, or rushing through the bumpy pasture to administer treatment to a sick calf – in any of these scenarios the General Lee would fail.

At Hoover Angus, we still like high performance cattle – after all, pay weight is the pay check for the vast majority of our customers. However, we believe that *optimal* is better than *extreme* and we strive to produce cattle that not only grow fast, but succeed at the normal, every day things ranchers need their cattle to do – successfully get pregnant, hold up structurally, and be long-lasting, to name a few. As breeders have vastly increased genetic merit for growth and carcass traits, breeders must remain cognizant that we are not just creating 700 hp engines to run on gravel roads of rural America.

~Landi