

News Column
by Greg McClure, KSU-Riley County Extension Agriculture Agent
110 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, KS 66502

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Phone: 785/537-6350
Fax: 785/537-6353

CROSSBREEDING

When I was in first grade, my teacher told my mom that I spent most of my time in school looking out the window. Instead of focusing on my work, I was constantly watching the cars as they came down the hill before passing by our school on their way to Speed, a bustling metropolis with a population approaching 75.

Later in life – when I was in eighth grade – a teacher told Mom I could do much better in school if I just tried. Now, I don't remember this part, but I've been told many times that my response when my mother reported the teacher's comment back to me was an emphatic, "B's are good enough!"

Before you label me an underachiever, I should mention that 7th grade was when I moved from the small two-room school in Speed to the big school in Phillipsburg, and I didn't handle the transition well at all. I missed about one fourth of my 7th grade year due to anxiety induced illness. I developed an ulcer, and I really was sick part of the time, but I now believe it was mostly anxiety.

By my 8th grade year I convinced myself that I would go to school every day, even if I was sick, and that grades didn't matter. It might not work for everyone, but it worked for me. Instead of worrying about grades, I chose to set a sustainable goal – attendance. Honestly though, good grades were pretty easy when I went to class.

By now, you and I are both wondering how this story ties into the crossbreeding topic I've

chosen for today's column. So, here's what I was thinking when I started writing today, before I lost focus and started rambling about grades and goals.

As a cattleman, my dad was probably like first-grade me, he didn't stay focused on the goal. To his credit, he entered the crossbreeding game fairly early, with Charolais cross calves arriving on the McClure farm in the mid-60s. Simmental and Maine-Anjou cross calves arrived in the early 70s. Gelbvieh took over in the 80s and 90s.

As you can easily conclude, we never really settled into a consistent, planned crossbreeding program. Dad knew early on that crossbreeding was an easy route to heavier calves at weaning, but we never really settled into being a commercial cowherd with a disciplined breeding plan. Instead, we just kept breeding for a higher percentage of whatever breed we were into at the time.

The reason cattlemen should consider implementing a crossbreeding program is because research has shown a 20-25% increase in pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed when comparing crossbreeding to a straight bred program with similar genetics. These results are from a crossbred cow, and not just in the first cross.

At one time or another, all cattlemen have probably seen the numbers, pointing out the added benefit of utilizing a crossbred cow, then breeding her to a bull of another breed. This type of three-breed terminal cross provides the biggest boost and is where we will see the 20-25% increase in efficiency.

Breeding a straight bred cow to a different breed of bull with similar performance will result in about an 8% increase in weaning weight. By using a crossbred cow, and factoring in the crossbred cows improved fertility, milking ability, and longevity, the benefit from crossbreeding jumps to a 20-25% increase in pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed.

If you are in love with your Angus cows, maybe you need to A.I. for one cycle to get replacement females, then clean up with a terminal sire like a Charolais or Simmental. If you want to make a bigger jump, you might A.I. to a Polled Hereford to make a bunch of baldy females, then turn out your terminal sire. In this scenario, you could keep the early born Angus-Hereford cross females and sell all of the calves sired by the terminal sire.

The important point here is that crossbreeding is easy money. You can gain 8% – without any added expense – by putting a Herford bull on a set of Angus cows. A terminal sire will provide a lot more than an 8% increase because of the added growth potential of a Charolais, Simmental, or other terminal breed.

I understand that black hide is popular, and there are value-added programs that reward black hide, but I wonder if you really get enough more for your straight black calves to make up for pounds lost by not crossbreeding?

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmclure@ksu.edu.

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