



Mistakes to Profit From

By Martin Turner

*"The fool repeats his mistakes.
The intelligent man learns from his mistakes.
The wise man learns from others' mistakes."*

-- Proverb

One of the things that irritates me a little bit about farm magazines is their tendency to report almost exclusively on successes. I suppose publishers (and their advertisers) think that most of us would rather read about success than failure, and they're probably right. But my experience has been that what I've learned from making mistakes is more valuable than what I've learned from being right. Of course I like success better than failure, but what I like best and what does me the most good aren't necessarily the same. I have only occasionally been wise enough to learn from others' mistakes. Most of the time I've had to learn from my own, and often only after repeating them.

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Not all mistakes are of the same magnitude, of course. A few are so huge that both law and economics usually prevent even fools from making them more than once. But most mistakes, even major ones, aren't usually fatal unless persisted in. To stop doing what isn't working is usually a good place to start learning from a mistake. It isn't really necessary to know what will work better in order to stop doing what doesn't work at all. When I found out that only 30 to 40 percent of the bred cows I bought actually delivered and raised a healthy calf and bred back on time, I quit buying cows. I thought I knew that raising my own replacements would cost too much, but it turned out that the alternative I chose cost even more. In the cow/calf business, reproductive success equals financial survival. If they don't reproduce, you don't have a business.

Before I decided to start raising my own replacements, I made the mistake of thinking that growth traits (milking ability, weaning weight, yearling weight) are more valuable than reproductive traits (fertility, calving ease, mothering ability). This mistake is an easy one to make, and a lot of people are making it these days. Part of the reason is that the contribution of growth traits to revenue is obvious and direct, while their contribution to costs is largely indirect and far less obvious. The fact that growth traits are so much easier to measure than reproductive traits adds to the temptation.

But the genetic truth is that growth traits are antagonistic to reproductive traits. This means that a selection strategy that focuses on ever-higher growth will necessarily sacrifice reproductive performance. While some of this reproductive penalty may be avoided by providing more and better feed, this increases costs along with returns, and may not produce higher profits. What's

worse in the long run, this approach masks the difference between more and less efficient cows, so the more you feed, the more you have to feed to maintain fertility.

There is a better way. Higher reproductive performance can be achieved at a lower total cost by selecting for smaller frame, lower milking, easier fleshing cows that have lower maintenance costs and are less vulnerable to nutritional stress. Cows like this can't be produced by feeding them everything they want to eat every day of their lives. You have to be willing to apply some selection pressure by strategically limiting feed resources at appropriate times.

If reproduction is your highest priority, the only time of year when a cow really needs to have all she wants to eat of the highest-quality feed is during the six weeks before calving. Better nutrition before calving contributes to a shorter anestrus period and higher fertility in early heat cycles. After calving, all it contributes to is more milk production and heavier calves. This is the fundamental argument in favor of late-spring calving. It's far less costly to provide a high-quality diet in the six weeks preceding the first of May or June, say, than in the six weeks preceding the first of March.

Replacement heifer development strategy should be informed by the same considerations. The nutritional regime they're subjected to from weaning to breeding has a dramatic effect on their reproductive potential. Feeding for fast gains on a high-energy diet during this period amounts to selecting for animals that excel under conditions of nutritional surplus.

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Association member Martin Turner with a few of the outstanding South Poll cows he sold last fall after he decided to retire from the cattle business.

If you have information you would like to share in upcoming issues of the newsletter, please submit information to or contact:

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There is no reason why a spring-born heifer, weaned in the fall needs to gain more than a pound a day over that first winter of her life, and I have seen acceptable conception rates after winter gains of as little as half a pound a day. Watching these heifers blossom during the spring flush of forage growth is a great pleasure, not least because it's so affordable.

A dependable supply of high-quality replacements is essential for long-run profitability. While this doesn't necessarily mean that every cow-calf producer must raise his own replacements, it does mean that if you can't find a reliable source that develops and manages their herd this way, you are almost certain to be disappointed with their reproductive performance.

Of course, the calves out of a cowherd that has been developed and managed this way will be smaller at weaning, but it's important to keep in mind that for a cow/calf enterprise, the most important and profitable "product" is those good old grandma cows who have never missed, not even

once, and are still raising decent calves at 12 to 15 years of age. Feeder calves are an important co-product, but they aren't the most important.

But even in a program where replacements are purchased and all calves are sold at weaning, this kind of cowherd will wean *more calves per hundred cows* (due to higher conception and survival rates) and can be stocked at a rate of *more cows per hundred acres* (because of lower maintenance costs per cow). The result is *more total pounds of calf, a higher price per pound* (because of the price slide on heavier calves), and *more dollars of return per dollar of cost*, in other words, more profit.

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Some of the cows and calves Martin Turner sold last fall, with Martin in the background. The cattle went to 10 different buyers, most of whom were association members.



Teddy Gentry stands between Martin Turner, right and his wife Bev, second from left, as they look at the Turner cattle.



Board members discuss whole herd reporting and bylaws at a Nov. 8, 2008 meeting held in Morgantown, Ky. The meeting was hosted by Steve and Keila Hampton.



Teddy Gentry, center, shoots the bull with association members in this photo taken last summer at a meeting held in Linn, Mo.



Staying On Course

By Teddy Gentry

As cattle breeders we are often tempted to reach for the extreme, a little of more this and a little more of that. This generally leads to excessive size of economic traits in our females and added management cost.

To merchandise the best-balanced calf philosophy can be difficult unless the prospective buyer is educated as to why "balanced" is better.



Teddy Gentry



A group of Turner cattle in one of his many paddocks.

Since our goal is to produce the most pound of beef (or most profit per acre) the most efficient size has to be the first thing determined. All of our IRM (Integrated Resource Management) data tells us that around a 1000-pound cow is the most efficient. She is more fertile, weans a bigger calf (on a percentage of body weight), and has a lot less maintenance than the bigger cow.

Even with this knowledge of the basics, it is still sometimes tempting to pick the biggest, longest, widest or other traits that sets an animal apart from the contemporary group. So as breeders of the South Poll cattle it is essential that we educate our buyers as to why balanced and efficient is the most profitable in the long run.

This philosophy takes discipline and unwavering belief in a small framed, deep bodied efficient mama cow.

Remember you can't get a 1000-pound cow out of a bull that weighs a ton.

Exhibit the same discipline when buying bulls. Insist on seeing the mama to make sure she has the utter quality, calving interval and the phenotype you need.

So be disciplined, stay on course and don't get caught up in chasing the latest fad.



A meeting of the association's board was held in January in Amite, Louisiana. The meeting was hosted by association member J.A.Girgenti, center, and his brother Nic, right. Association president, Teddy Gentry, is shown here with the Girgenti brothers.

Attend the South Poll Grass Cattle Association Annual Meeting and Field Day on June 20