



SOUTH POLL GRASS CATTLE ASSOCIATION

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Using South Polls to build a winning team

By Steve Freeman

Two of my favorite subjects are raising cattle and baseball. Two of my favorite books on these subjects are “The Lasater Philosophy of Cattle Raising” by Laurie Lasater and “MoneyBall” by Michael Lewis. One day on a long drive I started playing with the idea that breeding a profitable, easy-keeping and – most important – fertile herd of cows could be compared to how the Oakland A’s of the early 2000s built a winning baseball team.

Michael Lewis wrote the story of the small-market, cash-poor, 2002 Oakland A’s and the attempt by their general manager, Billy Beane, to compete in a league dominated by large-market [rich] teams that could sign the very expensive, free-agent, star players. Enter Paul DePodesta, a smart, computer-savvy Harvard grad who was hired after convincing Beane there were a lot of very good players who could be signed for smaller salaries if you knew what you were looking for. And what you should be looking for was not the big, strong, home-run hitters who were expensive to sign, but instead sign the players who got on base a lot – be it hits, walks or getting hit by pitches. Not using home runs, batting average, or the “right” physique as the criteria but instead looking at their on base percentage or OBP. The OBP is one number, the computers showed DePodesta, that correlates consistently with winning

games. They didn’t select the players on how fleet of foot or strong of arm but on whether they helped a team win and were affordable. Players who knew how to “get on base.”

What does breeding cattle have to do with building a baseball team of players who aren’t exceptional except for their ability to get on base? Lasater’s breeding system for raising fertile, profitable females calls for heavy emphasis on one trait – fertility.

Conceive early and conceive often. The system asks that heifers breed and conceive the first time at 14-16 months of age and breed back and calve every 365 days forever after. And the heifers/cows are required to do this with few, if any, outside-of-the-farm inputs. Any female that doesn’t produce an “acceptable” calf every 365 days leaves the herd. The breeder doesn’t do the selecting, the system selects them,

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While South Polls can handle the heat and humidity of southern Missouri, they adapt well to the cold weather that frequently hits all parts of the Show-Me State. The snow in this peaceful scene came in early 2015. December 2015 was warm and wet in Missouri. Shortly after Christmas 10-12 inches of rain fell in much of southern Missouri, producing record and near-record flooding in many parts of the state.



The Freeman calves are very uniform. In March a pen of five Freeman heifers sold near the top of the bred heifers offered at the Houston Livestock Show.

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and every heifer, outside of a few outliers [dinks, bad temperaments, etc.], is given a chance to show her stuff and breed during a short breeding season when she is 14-16 months old, calve without assistance at 22-24 months of age and then breed back again to have a calf 365 days later. Heifers aren't selected because they are the largest or have the correct pedigree, linear measurements or high EPDs. They are selected and make the "team" if they perform and contribute to profitability. Any that don't are cut from the team.

Why did Lasater place such a high priority on fertility? Because like most successful cattlemen he believed fertility to be the most important trait for being profitable in the cow/calf business.

His system doesn't have the breeder picking the "right" phenotype, but allowing nature to show the breeder what is the correct phenotype for an early maturing, fertile, easy-keeping cow.

Does this system take all the

knowledge and decision-making out of the breeder's hand? For years we thought so, but now understand that there is skill and thought needed in selecting the bulls for the system to work. We have been using this heifer development system for many years, but by using incorrect bulls, it turned out not to be a breeding system but just a culling system. Incorrect bulls in our case were expensive bulls with good EPDs, high gains in feeding trials, and were the "right" color. We also synchronized and bred our heifers to the top A.I. sires for calving-ease and growth. While we raised some good heifers, we still had far too many unadapted to the endophyte-infected fescue along with an inability to deal with the high heat and humidity of our summer [July/August] breeding system.

Looking back it's easy to see the errors we made. Most, if not all, of the bulls we used as well as their mothers had probably never had a mouthful of endophyte-infected fescue in their lives, or if they did, it was only between bites of grain. They probably never had to breed in high humidity with temperatures in the upper-90s and compete with herd mates on a daily rotation of grass.

We began using bulls of different breeds, mostly Brangus and Beef-

masters, and while we made progress in our pregnancy rates they were still too low. We had outstanding individual weaning weights on a few calves [home runs], but we had far too many calves that weaned small and didn't grow well as yearlings [strikeouts]. To top it off, the cows kept getting bigger which meant they were eating more [high salaries] without a higher correlation to weaning weights. What we were looking for was a herd that bred and thrived in our conditions, raised a calf about half of the cow's body weight and did it without a lot of inputs [low to average salary]. We were looking for cows that bred back every year in a tight-breeding schedule, and did it with good humor and no fanfare [good teammates]. We were looking for cows that "got on base."

Once we learned what to look for, our quest led us to the South Poll breed and by using bulls of this breed we found ourselves raising heifers that showed themselves adapted to our style of baseball [am I taking this analogy stuff a little far?]. Our breeding percentages have reached the lower 90% [yearlings, two-year-olds and cows] in a 45-day breeding window. The vast majority slick off early, are gentle, fertile, and show little to no problems with heat, humidity and flies. We are reaching our goal

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Plan to attend the
2016 South Poll Field
Day, which will be held on
June 24 and 25
at the home and farm
of Steve and Judy
Freeman.
1171 Woods Fork Rd.
Hartville, MO 65667

For details contact
Kathy Richburg at
256-996-3142
or visit the
South Poll Website



The Freeman cows are fertile and slick-haired and thrive in the heat and humidity of southern Missouri. But they also have wonderful udders, as is demonstrated by this cow.

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of an average weaning weight of 50% of the cow's body weight while quickly increasing the uniformity of the calf crop and cows. Our South Polls won't win grazing trials or give us the large weaning weights of the terminal breeds. But what they do give us is a good calf that continues to grow and thrive on nothing but forage after weaning. Most importantly,

South Polls give us a female that consistently "gets on base."

As for that 2002 Oakland Athletics team, they set the American League record for consecutive wins [20 games] and won the American League West division. Not bad for a bunch of "average" ball players.

Steve and Judy Freeman own and operate Woods Fork Cattle Co. in Hartsville, Mo. They have raised livestock in Wright County, MO., since 1978 – initially having a goat dairy, along with sheep and cattle. Currently they have 180-200 South Poll mama cows and 87 bred heifers.



Steve Freeman is shown with a radish and turnip, two annuals Steve and his wife Judy frequently plant to help with their winter grazing. In the fall of 2015 – due to an extended dry spell – they were forced to feed some hay to stretch out their pastures, but were able to keep the hay to a minimum.

Photos by Judy Freeman