INFLUENCE OF SHOWS ON PRODUCTIVE VALUES IN BEEF CATTLE

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SHOWS set the standard of type in beef cattle. The effect of shows is gradual and cumulative. There is nothing resulting from a show, similar to the discovery of a new vitamin, which may revolutionize certain branches of the feed industry almost overnight. Nonetheless, shows, and the judging of cattle at shows, do over the years set the standard of type.

What Shows Do Not Do

I think we need to keep in mind a few things that shows and judging of livestock do not do. All judging is a series of compromises. In judging livestock at a show, the judge tries to get what he considers the most of the best in his top animal. Anyone who knows anything at all about livestock will realize that, in a good show, the champion is not better in every respect than the reserve champion. Another thing we need to keep in mind is that judging is not an exact science. Rather, it is a combination of an art and a science. It depends upon ability to see and evaluate properly the various characteristics that comprise type.

SHOWS do not, of necessity, sort out the best breeding animal. We have all heard some critics of shows point out that the winning animal does not always prove to be the best breeder. We need, however, to keep in mind the fact that the show is not only the final testing ground of the art and science of breeding but also of the feeding, grooming and showing of livestock. Those who breed, produce, and show livestock do not expect, necessarily, that the champion bull is the best breeding bull in the ring; the fact that the champion bull in a big show does not prove to be the best breeding bull is not a valid criticism of livestock shows. People who use that argument against shows argue by inference that the wrong kind begets winners just as often as does the right kind. In this they are absolutely wrong.

Questions About Shows

Have shows resulted in the production of cattle that make more efficient gains than cattle made fifty years ago? Do cattle gain faster than they did previously? Maybe not, but we expect cattle to get fat at a lighter weight

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and younger age than was true in the past; and they do it. A 1000 lb. steer today is fat, and the one 25 years ago was not. Since fat is higher in caloric value, the steer of today might possibly require more feed per pound of gain than steers of 20 years ago and still be more efficient because he produces a higher type carcass—a carcass with a greater percentage of fat.

What about steer shows? Why do not winners on foot win in the carcass? If they do not, are not we wrong? Are they too fat?

A steer show is not a carcass show. If it is, why show on foot? A steer show should result in top placing for a steer that has the best combination of, first, those things demanded by the consumer through the packer, and second, those characteristics required for efficient development. In other words, the producer and consumer meet and get the animal that most nearly satisfies the requirements set by each of them.

Maybe an occasional steer is too fat. The only way to know if he will fatten is to give him a chance. The right kind, too fat, is no problem; all the producer has to do is to get that kind and sell him when he is fat enough.

What Shows Have Contributed

Coming back to the subject of the contribution that shows have made to productive values in cattle, one might claim for shows all of the advancement that has been made in beef cattle type and the production of beef over the years. How much of this credit should go to shows I do not know, but I do know that the growth of shows and the improvement of type have been going on at the same time. It is hard to separate one from the other and say that we would have just the type of cattle we have today had there been no shows, or to say that we would have the kind of cattle today that we had 100 years ago if we had not had shows in the meantime.

Responsibility of the Judge

It seems to me that for a show to mean anything we must first of all have a competent judge. We must have a man who has some notion as to type; certainly a competent judge will separate the right type from the wrong type, and that is about all one can expect in a show. We need not necessarily agree with the judge on his 1st and 2nd placings. If those who are watching a show would remember all of the top animals, that is the five or six tops in every class, and keep that type in mind, instead of worrying about whether one ought to have 1st or 2nd, then they will get a lot out of the show and get cattle type in mind.

What Should Not Be Done

We often hear the argument that if there is such a little difference between the 1st and 2nd prize animals, why not have the Danish system whereby the
first six or eight get blue ribbons and no distinction is made among them. We
would all like to have blue ribbons, but we do not want to run the chance
of getting a red ribbon. If we are about as good as the top one, we think we
are as good. Let's forget this idea of trying to make it easy on everybody, and
get ourselves back on the basis where all the cattle are valued by a com-
petent judge and are lined up according to his idea of their value—right or
wrong.

What Has Been Done

Shows have accomplished a number of things

1. They have set type and have undoubtedly accelerated change in type.
It may be that the present type is a slower growing beast than the old type;
but, although shows have emphasized the smaller type, they have at the
same time caused selection so that the smaller, typier beast gains just as fast
and as economically as did the old type.

In the early shows where breeders brought their cattle together for
comparison and sale, this change was more rapid and dramatic than it is
today. The relatively low heritability of the characters making up confor-
mation and also the long generation interval combine to make improvement or
change among the top animals relatively slow or almost imperceptible, and
we became impatient.

If we want to see the changes that shows are making, we should forget the
national shows and visit the small shows in the country where the quality
of the cattle is low. Here we can see changes that are perhaps more rapid
than changes effected during early times, because the producer has better
animals to go to when he wants to change or improve his type.

2. Earlier, I avoided an answer to the question, "Do cattle gain faster
and more economically than they formerly did?" Now I'll say "yes." The
vast change that has come to the southeastern United States during the
past ten or fifteen years is proof of that fact. The change is from nondescript
animals to animals built to do a specific job.

3. Shows, as much or more than any other factor, have brought about
selection for improved type and resulted in improved feeding methods. If
they had done nothing else, perhaps this incentive for better feeding is
sufficient justification for all the shows ever held.

What Can Be Done

Are there any changes that should be made in shows?

1. Perhaps in steer shows some class could be worked out to emphazise
the steer that makes economical and fast gains. I believe that is important,
and that belief has caused me to oppose weight classification for steers. That
sort of classification, in my opinion, officially disregards size as related to age.

2. A combination of placing steers as is done in most shows (first, second, etc.) combined with grading the steers before they leave the ring has some merit in shows for boys and girls. Perhaps a follow-up on carcasses would add to the educational value of the steer show.

3. The shows of breeding cattle might be altered so more emphasis is placed on economy of gain and on breeding ability. The get-of-sire class focuses attention on the prepotent sire, but this could perhaps be enlarged to include some considerations besides type.

4. Shows offer an opportunity for the greatest job of education that has ever been done in the livestock field. If the local adult shows and the junior shows have failed to do what is expected of them, who is to blame? You and I. I agree that shows have not done all that they might, but with them we have the people and livestock together—a perfect setting for a real job of adult teaching. Let us do such a job. Let us work toward better shows for better beef, rather than beef for better shows. Change shows? Sure! Abolish them? Never!