

Selecting a Champion

By Jason and Dylan Harris

Selecting the perfect heifer calf is not an easy job and it takes some skill to be successful at it. People that are not educated in the science of breeding beef cattle would most likely not know where to begin when it comes to evaluating cattle. I've had some of my friends make the statement, "A cow is a cow to me." This may be true if all you see is a furry, four-legged animal that walks around eating grass all day and "moo's."

However, when you are in the stock show business like we are, there's a little more to selecting the ideal calf for your next "4-H/FFA Beef Project." I have been selecting, raising and showing breeding beef heifers for almost seven years and I still learn something new that I did not look for in my selection every single year.

Selecting a heifer with a solid, skeletal frame and foundation is a must. If the heifer has skeletal issues such as a weak top-line (back) or is cow hocked in her hind legs or maybe sickle hocked, these issues will only worsen over time as the animal grows. Skeletal issues in heifers will lead to their inability to comfortably carry the extra weight of a calf when they come of age and this is a serious issue. She needs to be moderate boned, square in her shape as much as possible and "free" when she walks, planting the rear hoof inside or near the print of the front hoof. Pay particular attention to how the heifer walks, studying closely all four pasterns ensuring they flex freely and do not "pop" or look stiff. Just as important, watch her standing still; look for her feet to set comfortably with a slight angle. If her dew claws are set close to the dirt, then she may be weak in her pasterns and this is undesirable as it will cause more problems down the road. The heifers that do not pass the skeletal test should be sent on their way and not evaluated any further as a prospect.

Next, study those heifers that passed the skeletal foundation evaluation for their "depth of body;" that is, how deep their flank area is from the top-line, down to the udder. Ideally, you want the heifer with the "deepest flank" as she has the most calf-carrying capacity. Also, study the width of her rib cage, also referred to as "spring of rib." The wider the rib cage, the more natural capacity this heifer has that will also make it easier for her to carry a calf. Finally, take a look at the levelness of her "hooks-to-pins" area. This is the area from the front side of her hip to the pelvic bone area. This area should be fairly level, not sloped or elevated as this could lead to calving difficulties down the road.

After the skeletal and capacity traits have been evaluated, take a look at the overall condition of the heifer. Is she "muscled up" like a bull, or does she appear soft and feminine with moderate muscling? The ideal heifer should have a feminine "cow" look.

You do not want to walk a heifer in the show ring that looks like she's on steroids. She needs to be feminine in appearance.

After all of these important traits are studied and you have selected your top few to choose from, now is when color and pattern come into play, then it's just a matter of personal preference. However, more importantly than the color, evaluate their demeanor. Are they crazy acting? Sure, they'll be a little nervous because they do not trust you yet, but that crazy one is usually easy to spot as she'll make her way to the back of the herd even if she has to jump over the others.

These are the basic things that we look at when selecting our heifers and so far, it has paid off for us in the show ring.