



by Steve Martin

## Polishing hooves and clipping tail heads

SOME of my fondest memories growing up surround the training, grooming and showing of livestock. No matter whether it was a pig, a beef steer or a market lamb, the entire process was enjoyable. When you add to that a busy livestock judging schedule in high school, I spent a lot of time looking at animals.

Many years later, I still invest a significant amount of time studying and evaluating the physical appearance of animals. And in my case now, dairy animals.

Although I often say I am not the most skilled at this task among the other members of our consulting team, it occurred to me the other day that I might be getting better at it. Growing up mostly in the beef cattle world, the finer points of dairy animal evaluation have been a career-long learning process for me.

The ability to “see” cattle or other livestock well is a blend of learned skills and maybe some natural ability. And I think you have to like it to be good at it. Looking at cows is a part of my work routine that I do enjoy; it is a true blessing to get paid to look at cows!

I was walking a client’s dairy recently when I stopped my normal pen progression to take in the sight of a really nice group of first lactation animals. The weather was just right, I was in a good mood, and those heifers really looked great.

### Strong, healthy hooves

They were aggressively eating after returning from the parlor and really didn’t even notice I was in the pen with them. I was struck by the consistency of the group of maybe 300 head and how strong they looked in regard to body condition, hair coats, etc. As I looked them over I especially noted their strong, healthy hooves. It made me think about time spent clipping legs and polishing hooves of show animals as a kid.

While not to the degree of passion that I had in my youth, my children also did some livestock showing. There was a picture once in the Ama-

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rillo, Texas, newspaper of one of my sons using scissors to carefully trim the hair along the hoof-line of a market goat before a show. It was a great picture of the extreme care taken to allow the hooves to look as good as possible – a little overkill perhaps!

As I admired the set of strong and well-maintained hooves on those heifers, I thought about that picture of my son and his show goat.

I spend many hours behind my key-



board building diets for dairy heifers and mature cows. One small part of that is taking special care to be sure that micromineral supplementation is correct to support healthy growth and maintenance in cows’ and heifers’ hooves. It’s also my job to make sure they have enough roughage and not too much carbohydrate load, to insure healthy growth of hoof tissue. They’re just two of the scores of details that a ration formulator considers with every diet he or she builds.

No matter whether it is hoof evaluation in this instance, or looking at the hooks, pins and tail head of a

high producing cow to help assign a body condition score, we must take time to do visual evaluation of the previous formulation step. And this process takes time and some skill to complete in a fashion that actually adds value to the nutrition and management consulting process.

In some ways, taking the time to detail the appearance of various parts of a show animal’s body as a kid has helped me now, as I am tasked with evaluating thousands of those same body parts in herds that I am responsible to build diets for.

We want dairy animals with strong bones and crisp lines. That makes me think of working the hair on a dairy heifer’s legs, back and tail head to make the best possible first impression with the judge. Or carefully clipping and grooming shoulders and flanks to improve the overall look of body conformation for a market steer.

Having spent so much time focused on the shoulder of one beef heifer probably aids to the skill of quickly evaluating the body conformation and overall quality of a pen of springing Holsteins. Yes, the body condition goals may be very different, but the magic is in learning how to see the cattle correctly.

I was walking through a fresh pen with a client recently when I noticed something about his cows. The mature animals looked a little smaller than average, although I can’t say that I had noticed it before. It’s always a little difficult to compare the cows you are looking at to cows you saw yesterday or the day before, or even to what a standard or ideal cow might look like.

After a little conversation about my newly found revelation, the client confirmed that yes, they have been breeding for a more medium-framed Holstein. I was proud I had noted this correctly and a little embarrassed I hadn’t noticed it before. In an industry where actual body weights are pretty hard to come by, remembering information such as this will help me better model rations for those cows.

### Do a follow-up look

Not only is visual appraisal of the actual herd of cows helpful in modeling and building successful diets, it is

extremely important to take another look after the diets have been in place to evaluate their success. Looking at transition cows is maybe the best example of this.

After having built a succession of diets to get cows from the dry pen to a successful lactation, you have to look and see how the plan is working out. And when making a visual appraisal of fresh cows, we not only need to consider things like body condition, rumen fill, hair-coats and manure consistency, we also need to look into their eyes and at their posture to see if they appear happy.

After some practice, an overall “good-feeling” assessment can be made on fresh cows. Just like you can tell when your dog is sad or doesn’t feel well, we must take time to look at dairy animals to get an overall impression of their alertness and disposition. Sick cows look sick. Healthy cows look happy and curious. There is no data point for this in the herd management software, nor an ingredient in my nutrition model that directly relates. You just have to go look for yourself.

There are more and more examples of technologies coming to the market to literally track every movement of a dairy cow. We now have cameras for facial recognition that can measure eating time by a dairy cow or even predict sickness in pigs. These tools will help as we build data and write new algorithms to better manage livestock.

But just like a kid who is showing a dairy heifer carefully clips and grooms the animal so it will look a certain way to the judge, we must pay special attention to the visual appearance of our dairy animals. By doing so, not only can we better model and build diets to support maximum production and good cow health, we can also see that a change in course is due when things don’t go as planned.

Thinking not only of grams of minerals, metabolizable protein, and megacals of energy, but also considering hooves, hair and body flesh will help build better diets. Doing the former, while not ignoring the latter, will insure that we are feeding for the bottom line. **WEST**