



by Steve Martin

The value in hard work

THERE is something sacred about work. Our culture, though, is fixated on weekends and their lure of less work and more play or rest. And although the need for fun and rest is important, working hard at something we are passionate about is great. Is there a way to connect this value in work to today's dairy industry and our inquisitive consumers?

The way I grew up, our work centered on agriculture. It may have been hoeing watermelons, working stocker calves, throwing hay bales or planting Loblolly pines, but no matter which one it was it was still work.

This was the stuff that weekends, Christmas breaks, spring breaks and summers were made of. The fences needed mending before the cows got out, the melons needed to be hoed before the vines covered the middles, and the hay needed to be stacked before the rain.

Move ahead 40 years for me. The principle is the same, but the tasks are different. There are still cows and some hay involved, but the cows are for milk not beef. There are long drives home from faraway clients, early mornings to get a project finished, and time spent thinking about things like business relationships, biology and economics. It's all work.

I know I'm not the only one working. There is significant effort from my clients, their employees and yes, by the cows. Especially by the cows. There is something else different between the medium-sized vegetable and stock farm I grew up on and the dairies that are now my clients. Back in the 1980s when I was becoming passionate about growing food for people, none of those consumers asked me how we cared for our cattle or if our melons were GMO.

Dog-colored glasses

Let's focus on the question about how we cared for the animals. We did the best we could to provide a healthy environment for them. Now, for some, this sentiment isn't good enough. I have pondered recently one potential reason why some consumers have a hard time reconciling the concept of production animals. It has more to do with the family dog than it does with a dairy cow.

When I was growing up most of the people I knew had some concept of agriculture. Many were involved themselves or they were just one or two generations away from the farm. There was a sense of the need to produce food, and the understanding was that it involved hard work by both the people and the animals. In the time since my youth, this dynamic has totally changed. We now have "foodies". But in a sense, aren't we all foodies? After all, we all do eat.

There are perhaps three types of foodies. The first

would be one who has some knowledge of agriculture and food production. The second would be one who is very critical of the way an evolving food production system is gearing up to feed 9 billion people. The third might enjoy food and have a favorite grocery store, but decides to focus on or worry about other things. Everyone who eats though, is a foodie.

Let's get back to the family dog, the mind-set of some consumers, and the value in work. The average consumer today looks at **all** animals through the concept of their family pet. The list of those in the animal kingdom (humans included) that don't have to work is very short. And chief among them is the only animal that non-agriculture connected consumers can relate to – the family pet.

Take a minute to contrast a family pet to any number of other animals. Fido gets his food handed to him, has no fear of predators, and often even gets a grooming and a bath. How do his cousins the wolf and the coyote compare? Those feral relatives must walk miles looking for food, withstand severe hot or cold weather, rain, hail and the risk of predators.

Consider a deer walking miles in cold, snow-covered country looking for fodder. Or an animal in a desert that must walk miles just to get to water. Maybe it's a bird working tirelessly to gather one twig at a time to build a nest, or bees that are ever-busy constructing an intricate hive. All of this is work, something unknown to the most common animal that the average consumer can relate to. Nobody would make their dog or cat work so hard just to survive.

Hard work appreciated

But what about other domesticated animals? Let's look at history. Consider the ox pulling hard against the resistance of a plow, or the pack mule with a heavy load and a long day's walk between feed and water.

Before "beast of burden" was a song by the Rolling Stones, it was an animal with a lot of work to do. And know this: good animal owners then, as now, after along day pulling a plow or carrying a heavy load, see that animal got fed and watered before being put up for the night, and probably got a pat on the shoulder as sincere praise for a doing a good job.

Horses may be the hybrid in this discussion. The bond between horses and people is like that of pets and has been the subject of many books, movies, etc. But no matter how close this relationship, most owned horses are expected to work. And it is what they really want to do. I think about a horse under a Comanche rider after miles across the American West. Wet through with sweat and breathing hard, these animals had high expectations for a day's work.

All production animals work, although it's more easily seen in some than others. The metabolic effort to simply eat, live and grow in often poor weather is the main task for some. Perhaps the perfor-

mance horse and the dairy cow stand out as having the most daunting metabolic workload. Just look at the calories they consume and use in a day.

When a pet-focused animal lover looks at a dairy cow, they might wonder if she is happy. When I look at one of my client's cows, I know our goal is to make them happy through much effort. But I also know the expectation of this cow is to work to convert her diet of mostly low-value carbohydrates into high quality human food. This is work for her and we need not be apologetic about it.

My goal as an advisor to dairy owners is to try and set up that cow for success. Working along with producers, we fine-tune scores of details to be sure that the metabolic machine that a dairy cow is can put in a solid day's work and still be the healthy, curious animal she is designed to be.

Cows are athletes

We should never look at a production animal and expect an easy life that is free from work, stress, bad weather, health issues and metabolic risks. The person training for a marathon runs every day, rain or shine, hot or cold and endures an occasional sprained ankle. Neither the dairy cow nor the marathon runner has much in common with my lazy dog. (Its easy life is the exception not the rule.)

The consumer should see a picture of a dairy cow walking to the parlor for the third time in a day and rightfully see a connection with the marathon runner, not with their overweight golden retriever.

All of us in agriculture need to continue to communicate these principles to our non-ag friends. All the while, we need to be determined to set up these working cows for success. Our role is like that of a trainer helping athletes win.

For those of us in the dairy industry, these efforts include good cow comfort, continually improving nutrition, comfortable housing, and thoughtful genetic progress. It is in an environment like this that the athletic dairy cow can work and perform at a level of economic success and life cycle sustainability. We all must work, and we all expect this work to be in as positive of an environment as possible. But it is still going to be work – and work is hard.

As nutritionists, veterinarians, geneticists and other professionals work to improve the situation of the working dairy cow, let's not forget to tell the story of this amazing creature and her ability to help feed the world by converting things like wheat straw and corn stalks into milk, butter, cheese and ice cream.

As for my part in this, I commit to making continual improvements in ways to supply a better nutrient package to meet the needs of our cows. While considering the biology that makes this happen and remembering the economics necessary to keep it going, we will all work together and feed for the bottom line. **WEST**

The author is founder of Dairy Nutrition and Management Consulting LLC, which works with dairies and heifer growers in Texas, New Mexico, Kansas, Colorado and Washington.