

THE NEED TO FEED

Chances are you've spent many miles searching out the perfect prospect to add to your show barn this fall. When you get it home, you'll be amid a whirlwind of halter breaking, brushing and rinsing. But one of your most basic barn chores can have a huge impact on your showing success – feeding.

Ask any showman or successful breeder who has spent lots of time holding banners in front of a backdrop, and they'll likely tell you feeding show cattle is much more than throwing feed at them twice a day.

"Feeding is very important. I think selection of the animal is first in my opinion and nutrition is right behind it," John Jacobs of Jacobs Cattle in Liberty Center, Indiana, said. "With a well-managed feed program, you are able to not only allow ones to reach their full potential but also manipulate ones that may need help or to be better in certain areas."

Tyler Cates of Cates Farms in Moadoc, Indiana, agrees. He believes that a solid nutrition program is even more important than rinsing and brushing. Surprisingly, the foundation of a good feed program is very basic – your base feed.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THAT BASE

Your base ration is the foundation of your feeding program. Regardless of what brand of feed you decide to use, or if you have your own recipe milled, your base ration is like the control in your experiment. It's what changes and additions you make to your basic formula that yield results.

"A basic ration for show cattle in our part of the country usually consists of corn, oats, a protein source (typically a

pellet), wet molasses and possibly a fiber source such as beet pulp, cottonseed hulls or soy hulls depending on the diet," Jacobs said.

Cates Farm keeps their basic mixture very simple with corn, oats and cottonseed hulls as the main ingredients. Where things start to get a little more complicated is customizing your base mixture to match the body type, maturity pattern, fleshing ability and muscling of your calf. By changing the ratios of ingredients in your base or adding feed-stuffs you can customize your rations to maximize your show cattle's performance.

"I really like to get a base feed and feed the majority of cattle with it," said Jacobs. "If I have a pen of cattle that are getting plenty on them in terms of condition, I can bring in a high fiber top dress and incorporate that into their diet to prevent them from getting too fat. Typically, on our fat steers, we will have to go to a finishing feed with a higher inclusion of corn at some point in their life, but others finish out fine on a grower-type feed."

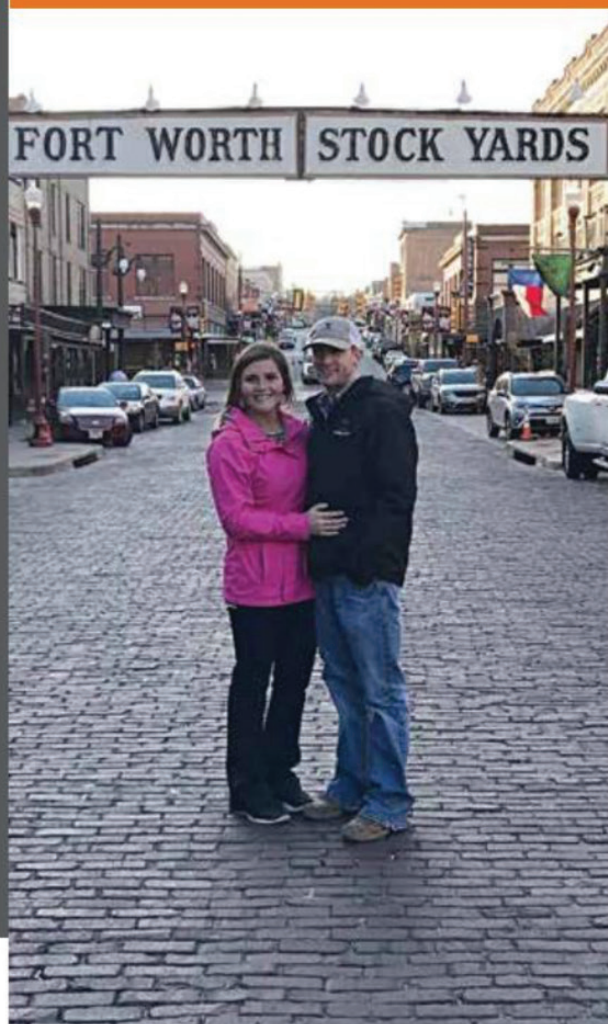
Cody Lowderman and Jae VanHorn of Lowderman Cattle Co., in Macomb, Illinois, keep the

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formula of their basic ration very fluid.

"It is all dependent upon what condition and maturity level you are at with a specific animal," they explain. "Most of our rations consist of corn, oats and feedstuffs, such as cotton hulls and soy hulls. We like to keep our protein levels at least 12 percent, but gender maturity level, confirmation and condition all affect how you feed that animal drastically. For example, we are not going to feed a bull calf the same as we would a yearling heifer."

Customizing your base ration to meet your animal's type and kind is where you find the true science, and some would even say fun, behind feeding show cattle. To feed a calf to its full potential you have to know how to make their body work, and more importantly, have a vision of what you're working for.

MAKE THAT BODY WORK

"The most important thing to me is to know what kind of animal you have in front of you, know where you want to go or how you want to change it, then that gives you the ability to select the right type of feed for that calf to get the best results," Jacobs said. "As important as nutrition is, I feel it is as important to be able to see the livestock correctly and evaluate what they need to improve your chances of success."

When evaluating show cattle on your feeding program, one aspect that must

be considered is their maturity pattern and composition. Both of these have a huge effect on how you will feed that animal.

For example, everyone agrees that earlier-maturing, easier-fleshing cattle need a diet that is higher in protein and fiber and lower in energy and fat. This diet allows that animal to grow and perform without becoming over-conditioned and fat. Whereas if you have a harder-doing calf, they would need a feed that is higher in fat and energy to reach their optimum condition.

Jacobs refers to this as positively affecting cattle with the feed bucket. In Jacobs' barn, they have a few basic rules of thumb that they follow.

"On younger cattle, it is important to increase the amount of protein in their overall diet, because younger cattle have higher needs at this point in their lives because they are growing more rapidly. Plus, they don't typically consume as much on a daily basis," he said. "Heifers tend to mature more quickly or put on body condition faster than steers, so we tend to have more fiber in their diets later in the growing phase and not as much corn, to help reduce the chances of getting too fat."

Monitoring how your calf's body and condition is impacted by your ration is one of the key factors in feeding animals' according to their body type.

At Cates Farms animals are set up on

a halter and evaluated for body condition once a week. Cates prefers to do this while they're still wet if they have a lot of hair, so he can better evaluate where they've filled in.

"I want a heifer where she is somewhat smooth in her appearance, and you feel like she has developed her width and power, but before she starts putting fat in her brisket, chest and throat," he said. "I keep my cattle a little thinner because I will sacrifice a little width and dimension to keep their chest laid in right."

If you market seedstock, likes Cates, or plan to retain your show heifer as a cow, then monitoring condition in females has extra value. Oftentimes, heifers that are too fat have trouble breeding, calving and milking. The art of feeding is knowing when to push one and when to stay steady when to change their ration and what the ingredients can do. Take the example of a heifer that needs more body, it's not as simple as getting her fatter.

"If you're trying to put more body or belly into one, the answer isn't to get them fatter," Lowderman said. "A lot of times instead of pushing a 'hot feed' that is heavy corn and high fat, what they may actually need is to increase their intake of bulk products and fillers to expand their stomach."

Cates currently has 25 show calves in the barn, and he estimates they have about 18 different feed mixtures that

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are spin-offs of their base ration. But Cates will admit, even the best feeder can't change the structure of an animal. Although you can improve a show calf, a harder bodied female will always be to some extent harder middled than her naturally deeper ribbed counterparts.

TOP IT OFF

Top dresses are often touted as cures to a variety of show cattle problems – body, hair, soundness, condition, and so on.

"I've not used anything I think is a fluke," Cates said. "But I'm not sure there is anything that if you took it away that I wouldn't be able to live without."

According to Jacobs, there are countless top dresses available and many of them have their place. He, personally, tries to keep them to a minimum and use those that he knows work. His feed room usually has a yeast product to encourage microbial production in the rumen, a high protein pellet for those needing extra freshness and the occasional joint supplement.

The rule with top dresses seems to be that no matter how many supplements they buy, none will replace a good feeding program. With that said, there are certainly some products that can complement your rations and help you meet your goals.

CHANGES

Whether you're adding a top dress or increasing their feed, cattle need time to adjust to changes. Changing gears in your feeding program too fast can result in setbacks and even sickness, and it all starts from the time you bring your new calf home.

"When purchasing prospects this fall and switching them to your own ration, I think it is imperative to visit with the respective owner that you purchased the animal from and discuss what kind of ration they were on," Lowderman said. "I would recommend starting them on something similar to what they had been on and gradually adding your own ration while taking away the old until they are totally on your ration."

Jacobs tells his customers to blend the new and old feed in a one-third to two-thirds ratio for 2-3 days before mixing it half and half for another few days before finally feeding a two-thirds to one-third ratio. When you finally switch them to your feed completely – after a week to 10 days – you won't have to worry about any stomach problems.

As a general rule of thumb, Jacobs tells folks to feed their calf about 2-2.5 percent of their body weight.

FINDING FORAGE

In addition to grain and top dresses, all cattle need forage. Our sources all personally feed their show cattle grass

hay. They agreed that in their programs grass hay gives their cattle the extra body judges are looking for in the showing without adding extra fat or condition.

While grass isn't a necessity for cattle on balanced feeding programs with plenty of grass hay as forage, Lowderman uses grass traps to freshen up bigger heifers, if they have plenty of time before their next show. The extra exercise cattle can get by being turned out can be a good complement to their feeding program.

KEEP LEARNING

While Cates, Jacobs and Lowderman have all been feeding cattle long enough to find feeding programs that work for them, they're also constantly looking for new ideas or ways to learn more about show cattle nutrition. If the experts are still learning about feedstuffs, then you should too. Ask your calf's breeder, notice what people seem to be feeding at shows, study up on ingredients and the nutrients they provide.

If you're just starting out, remember sometimes the most effective path is the simplest.

"Sometimes the simpler you can keep feeding, the better," Cates said. "If you have a young, green calf and you're just trying to get there, get a good basic ration and give them enough that you know they will clean it up each day." ■

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