DROVERS/NEWS/TOP STORY

Life is Too Short for Mean Cattle: Why Docility is the Ultimate Profit Trait

Whether it's reducing dark cutters at the plant or boosting AI conception rates in the pasture, the genetics of docility are redefining modern cattle selection.

By Maddy Rohr

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(Mushrush Angus)

If you've been around cattle for a long time, it's likely you have been run out of a pen once or twice by a high-strung cow or bull. Poor disposition and docility in cattle can be both hereditary and caused by the surrounding environment. For some producers, docility expected progeny differences (EPDs) are especially important to buying seedstock cattle.

Holton Red Angus runs about 600 commercial and 300 registered Red Angus cows in Cisco, Texas. After buying a few donors with the goal of raising herd sires for his herd, Paul Holton found himself selling 50 or more bulls a year in private treaty sales in the area. Now they have their own spring bull sale. When sorting bulls for the sale, disposition is top of Holton's mind.

“For the average customer, disposition means a lot,” Holton says. “I don’t tolerate [bad] disposition. When I was younger, it didn’t bother me, but I was young and dumb, and I didn’t really realize the consequences that it has when they do make it to the feedyard. Those cattle, the offspring, are going to be goofy too. It hurts their overall gains. You get the dark cutters.”



While he does have a few larger ranches that don’t focus on disposition as much because they do everything horseback and don’t handle the cattle, most of his customers are not interested in high-strung bulls.

Genetics vs. Environment: What Trumps?
A trait that has been directly correlated to genetic heritability, it is often wondered how much environment impacts docility. Holton has seen first-hand how docile genetics trump environmental chaos.

“I had a set of cows years ago that were just recipient cows, and they weren’t the gentlest I’ll say,” Holton explains. “I put embryos in those cows and thought they’re going to be idiots. It had zero effect on those calves. Of course, if you don’t ever go check your cattle and they don’t see humans but once a year, I’m sure they’re going to be a little bit dumb, but overall, I think the genetics will trump just about everything.”



The 1-to-5 Scale: Sorting for Safety and Performance
Mushrush Red Angus in Strong City, Kan., is a multi-generational seedstock operation, with a fall and spring bull sale strictly selling 18-month-old bulls. They rank their cattle with their own docility scoring system.

“Every year before we do our catalog, we’ll run each bull between two people in an alley, not very wide, and they’re brought out by themselves,” Christine Mushrush explains. “We basically rate their nervousness, for lack of a better word. We have a scale of one to five: one being the most docile. We don’t really even run anything in our sale that’s a four or five. We try to stick to one, two or three.”

If a bull ranks a five, they go straight to the sale barn. They do the same process with their heifers, using it as a trait to help sort the replacement heifers and culls.



“First and foremost, docility is important for safety,” Mushrush says. “Life is too short to deal with uncooperative animals.”

The Biological Link: Stress, Vaccines, and Breeding
While docility can be inherited from genetics, Mushrush also points out how an animal’s demeanor can impact others around it.

“If you get one crazy, they can spoil a whole group,” she says. “If you’re getting pushed on and slammed into when you know you’re in an environment, you might not appreciate that much and start acting that way too.”



When handling cattle, the calmer they are, the more effective you are, she adds. If you’re giving vaccinations or artificially inseminating, or whatever it may be, they need to be as calm as possible.

“The lower their stress level, the more effective that vaccine is, and it really does make a difference in terms of trying to boost your conception rates,” Mushrush says. “It just allows all things to work better — the handling, your vaccine, your breeding, everything like that.”

Mushrush believes you can positively impact a less docile animal by being calm when handling them in your facilities. Even the higher-strung or hotter cattle can benefit from having a good experience around people, which will impact their future behavior.



“When we have an auction, we’re not sure where an animal will end up,” she says. “We do sell a lot of [bulls] individually, and so you have got to be confident that animal will go and be calm for that person, because you don’t know what situation they’re going into too. I do believe our buyers definitely look at that score that’s listed in the lot profile and more and more we are hearing: ‘I need a quiet bull, or I need a quiet heifer. I need them to be cooperative.’”