

Playing the 'numbers' game -

a panel discussion with views from 4 authorities

BY JOYCE BUPP
Staff Correspondent

PITTSBURGH - Early birds at the Pennsylvania Holstein convention didn't get the worm - but they turned out in force to hear a panel of well-known industry representatives argue the hottest subject going in the breed business.

"Should We Play the 'Numbers' Game?" was the question debated at the 7 a.m. Saturday session, drawing a roomful of interested listeners and some heated discussion.

At the heart of the issue are the cow indexing and sire summary computer numbers formulas. These computer-figured, numerically-based evaluations measure an animal's genetic potential.

Stirring up new murmurings by many breeders on the "numbers" issue is a recent national Holstein board ruling to utilize only one classification score in evaluating the daughters of a sire. The score used will be the closest to 30-months of age, and not beyond 42 months, and will determine Predicted Difference in Type, or PDT. Previously, a cow's most recent classification was figured into sire proofs, changing the sire's proof if daughters changed in classification as they matured.

Those favoring the new rule say it will make all sire proofs more fair, since only data on cows basically the same age will be computed.

Protesters of the new rule say it ignores durability in cows and locks in a proof before the long-term performance of daughters can be fairly evaluated.

Panelists were Dr. Robert Everett, a geneticist at Cornell University; Dennis Wolff, Pen-Col Farms; Pete Blodgett, Landmark Genetics; and Donald Seipt,

Keystone Farms. Ron Buffington, Holstein Investment Opportunities, moderated.

Long-time Holstein breeder Don Seipt admits they play the "numbers" game at their Easton farm, but dislikes it immensely.

After 30 years of breeding cattle that earned Keystone considerable industry respect and 28 Progressive Breeder awards, Seipt finds indexing demands a "radical departure" from his basic cattle-breeding beliefs.

About 12 years ago, Seipt responded to industry pressure to begin using higher Predicted Difference bulls of the time, in order to regain markets the farm was losing to higher indexed herds. Sires such as Elevation, Astronaut and Bookmaker - sires now lower in index favor - became familiar at Keystone.

Then, five years ago Keystone, with reluctance, went to total use of high PD bulls to meet merchandising demands.

"We were told that we didn't really have anything good or superior genetically; that it was all just good management. That was demoralizing and depressing. Now, we're starting to lose type. And those with numbers from the very beginning are still ahead."

"Numbers" indexing has resulted in showing competition being nothing more than an "ego trip" for exhibitors, Seipt figures, and gives no credit to longevity or durability in individuals. He further criticized the decision to base sire proofs solely on first classification of daughters, and suggested the formula "protects the proof long enough to sell a lot of semen, and then 'the bull turns out not to be the bull we thought we selected.'"

"The system doesn't wait for the bull's real impact," Seipt added,

further leveling criticism at the unavailability of semen from certain sires just before sire proofs come out semi-annually.

"It's all great if you're in the semen business...or are selling embryos...or baby calves," flatly states Seipt.

Seipt says that while, in his opinion, indexes aren't all wrong if practically designed and kept in proper perspective, the current formulas result in "paper figures." That offers only part of the necessary information to successfully breed animals, he adds, and the use of the computer numbers is just a shortcut to real thinking and consideration in mating cattle.

Columbia Countain Dennis Wolff has become a recognized leader for his high indexed animals, and his experience and success in worldwide marketing of ET offspring and eggs.

Two herds are maintained at Pen-Col, near Millville, both run on the same DHIA testing program. Wolff's main herd includes one hundred head of "genetically superior" individuals, including sixty two-year-olds, and as he notes, "no row of good old cows." In the second herd of 45 head are lower producers, along with some recipient animals.

Wolff is quick to admit that his breeding philosophy has changed over the years to embrace the needs of the market.

"If that's in the minority of the breed, it eventually will not succeed," he projects.

Wolff also notes that he does not go to any great lengths to contact potential purchasers of his high indexed genetic offspring; buyers come seeking his merchandise. He openly acknowledges the two-herd arrangement, letting AI personnel and other potential customers evaluate for themselves what influence it might have on performance records.

High PD sires are selected at Pen-Col to continue development and enhancement of the high indexed individuals, along with functional type, Wolff elaborated later. He further feels that functional type and classification type are not parallel, and classification typing leans too heavily toward "showing" traits.

"I'd like to change the emphasis on mammary to center support and udder depth and see less criticism of foreudder attachment. Calving a cow at 1 year-9 months that milks 75 pounds is going to result in a bulging fore udder," Wolff explains.

S-W-D Valiant is still seeing heavy use in the Pen-Col mating program, along with some select young sires. Wolff first heavily weighs PD\$ when making sire choices, followed by emphasis on type, test and protein.

Landmark Genetic's Pete Blodgett has been matching genetic traits and arranging bull mother contracting in the dairy industry for some twenty years.

He sums up his personal breeding philosophy as "don't stray too far from the middle of the road." Breeders, he says, should not "tie their wagon" to cow indexes.

Blodgett acknowledged the numbers controversy and its direct influence on marketing cattle, but noted that the breed will always need "free thinkers." These specialists will steer away from popular trends and breed to their own philosophies. And, such individualists lead to a pool of genetic variety, an alternative of genetics should marketing needs change down the road.

"A lot of badmouthing of the numbers game is caused by going to extremes," is how Blodgett sees



Dr. Robert Everett: "Preferential treatment of cows can influence a pedigree index."



Early-bird seminar panelists: Blodgett: "Don't stray too far from the middle of the road."



Don Seipt: "Indexes are great if you're in the semen business - selling calves - or embryos."



Dennis Wolff: "We have no row of good old cows."



New officers for the Holstein Assoc. are, left, Art Baxter, Tim Merwarth, and Walter Wurster.



Dan Carr, left and helper, take care of restoring the ballroom to its former state by removing the sawdust.

the current spate of criticism of indexing.

He, too, was critical of the change in formulating PD type, through the use solely of first-time daughter classification.

Needs of the industry, Blodgett adds, are for females high in fat, protein and functional type traits. Just because an individual is low in index doesn't mean she is unable to transmit genetic value. In Blodgett's opinion, good breeding must combine "common sense" with all the available tools for selection toward improved type and production.

Dr. Robert Everett is a Cornell University geneticist, and a staunch defender of the indexing formula system. He reviewed the indexing program and related his beliefs on the correctness of the current computerized genetic measure methods.

One of Dr. Everett's concerns, however, is of pedigree slippage. Slippage depicts the ranking of animals higher than they genetically merit.

Part of that concern focuses on the relationship of "preferential treatment," or the extra or box-stall attention lavished on individuals within a herd, to enhance the animal's overall performance.

According to the geneticist, such preferential care could potentially influence a cow's production

records by perhaps 2,000 pounds, or boost a pedigree index \$22 above its actual true genetic numerical merit.

Embryo transfer sons may reflect this preferential treatment, warns Everett, and that could result in some ET sires considerably lower than non-ET sires in their true ability to transmit desirable breeding characteristics.

"The problem is educating people," is Dr. Everett's view of the criticism of the numbers debate.

He further predicts the possibility of commercial dairymen setting up separate genetic evaluation methods, if those currently in place do not meet their needs.

Moderator Ron Buffington kept the discussion, which included a host of questions, flowing at a lively rate, with the debate continuing around the participants even after the session adjourned.

He assured breeders - many of them visibly angry over the indexing trend - that the registered Holstein business encompasses a large breed, and not everyone has to play the same "game."

"No tool will replace all tools," concluded Buffington. "Each is a building block; and we need to not go to extremes."

"Just keep an eye on the market."



The Scott Brothers, from New Florence, provided the entertainment for the Convention Banquet.