

The Dairy Business

By
Newton Bair

Numbers - Fact or Fancy?

Why all the fuss about numbers in breeding cattle? The argument seems to revolve around the cow and bull INDEXES. The index is a number that indicates the true breeding value of the animal. How the number is interpreted is

another matter.

The main fear seems to be based on the fact that breeding has been taken over by mathematics. It seems to by-pass the "breeder" with some mysterious power to mix and match a winning com-

ination. The "numbers" remove the mystery, and for some it removes the fun.

Since the cow index is used as a basis for special matings for potential herd sires, it becomes desirable to own cows with a high index.

One of the complaints often heard is that, in a high producing herd, where nearly every cow is producing at the 20,000 pound level, the individual cows may have only an average index.

This poses a mystery, and raises questions. Are these high producers not good enough to produce AI bulls, just because they have a low or average index?

The answer lies in the complexity of the mathematics used in the index formula. Most of us are not mathematicians, so the formula as well as the solution becomes a mystery.

We would rather take our chances on mating our favorite bull to the highest producer in the herd. Isn't that the way Grandpa did it? Isn't that the way Ivanhoe,

Elevation, and most of the other big name bulls were bred?

Some smart breeder hit on the right mix, and it clicked to produce a great bull. But remember that even these great sires would be considered mediocre by today's standards.

The point is, the figures don't lie. Within the last 10 years, the real genetic progress is so obvious that you don't need glasses to see it.

Take a casual glance at the production records that are broken every day. Compare your herds production record to ten years ago. How many 20,000 pound cows could you find in your own or your neighbors herd 10 years back? Look at the DHIA listings, and draw the conclusion that something dramatic has happened.

Allowing some credit for better feeding and management, that minor miracle boils down to numbers. Feed and management can only go as far as genetic ability will allow it.

The miracle is in the proper understanding and use of numbers. If we can't understand the formula, we should not therefore discard it.

The real proof is that it is working, so it must be trusted. The only danger is that someone will juggle the numbers, and come up with a false result.

Sure, liars can figure, and there has been some of that kind of juggling done in order to get higher indexes. Cases are well documented, and only need to be publicized to warn the unwary. But the great majority of breeders are honest, and the Co-op Bull stud managers are un-biased in their decisions.

So, in most cases we can trust the "numbers." The real proof is in the results that we see every day, in the unbiased bull proofs published indexes used to select matings.

Are you still suspicious of "numbers" and formulas? They have always been mistrusted by those who do not understand them.

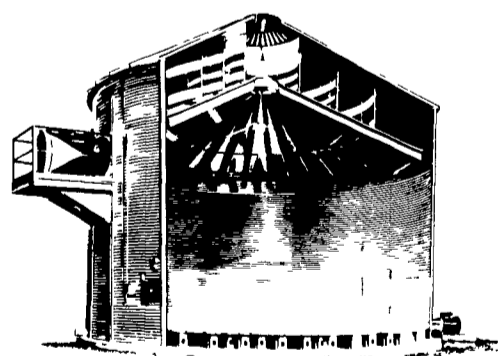
Even PI, the magic number without which we could not calculate the area of a circle, was mistrusted when first discovered. Who of us really understands $E=MC^2$? But we know that it harnessed the Atom, and helped get us to the Moon.

The formula that calculates cow indexes is even more complex than either of those, but has produced just as remarkable results.

As a breeder of cattle, or as a producer of milk, it behooves us to try to understand the numbers that are serving us well. And if we can't really understand them any more than we understand PI, perhaps we can learn to trust them because they really work.

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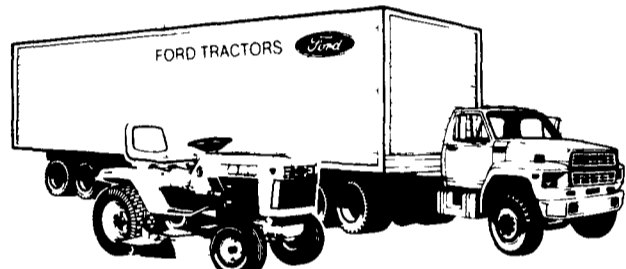
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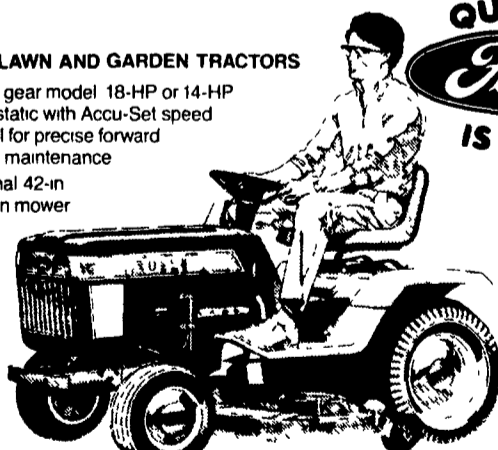
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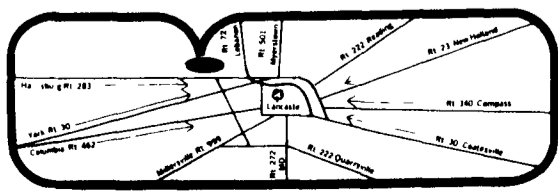
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