# Body Condition Scoring, An Important Dairy Farm Tool

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pregnant and then we have the client body score the cows at approximately 200 days of lactation in order to assess whether or not the cows need to gain more weight during their last third of lactation. They body score them at the time of drying off in order to ensure that they have gained the necessary weight that they will need for the next lactation. Also, the body condition score at the time of drying off becomes very important because when we body score them the day they calve, we can get an assessment of whether they have lost or gained weight during the dry period. We are not necessarily trying to get cows to gain a lot of weight during the dry period but it is extremely critical to have these cows not lose weight during the dry period. Again, there is research that shows cows that lose weight during the dry period don't peak as well as they should and they also have reproductive problems. These same cows if they lose weight during the dry period have an accelerated weight loss in the first month after calving. There has been a published report out of Cornell University showing that cows that loose body score of 1.5 or greater during the first month after calving have a conception rate of 17% or less on first service. Normal conception rate in the Northeast and in Canada should run around 55-60%. Thus, you can see that there is a dramatic difference between the normal conception rate and the conception rate for those cows who lose extreme amounts of body weight after calving. Thus, we have to monitor the cows' nutrition program during the whole year not just during the first month or two after she calves. It becomes extremely important to monitor these cows during the last 100 days of their lactation in order to have them gain the necessary weight for the next lactation and then have a specific dry cow program so they do not lose that weight during the last part of the dry period.

If we try to feed dry cows according to the National Research Council's recommendations, they are prone to lose weight during the last three weeks before calving because these recommendations don't seem to take into account the demands that the growing fetus makes on the mother and thus, they have a tendency to lose weight. I will try to come back to this in another article and we will talk about dry cow management and some of our thoughts on feeding dry cows.

Now that we know when to body score, what kind of scores are we looking for during different stages of lactation? We like cows to go dry and to calve with a body score of about 3.5-4.0. During the first month, the body score will drop about 0.5-0.75. In other words, for a cow that calves at 4.0, we would like to have her down to 3.25 by the end of the first month and then by the time she reaches peak at about 70 days, she will have fallen down to about 2.7-3.0. This is a nice controlled body weight loss. Thus, we should be breeding cows with a condition score of 2.70-3.0 and then starting at about 150-180 days after calving, they should be back up to 3.2 and then, by the time they go dry, they should be back up to 3.5-4.0 We are now talking about groups of cows and there are some cows out there, just like people, that you can not fatten. These cows are what we call "super cows" because they seem to be able to maintain a thin body condition and still perform a normal lactation and breed back normally. These cows, if you measure feed intake, have tremendous appetites and far out eat what we consider the normal cow as far as roughage consumption is concerned.

In the past, people have said that we should weigh and measure heifers and put them on a growth chart and I highly recommend this. There are some people now who measure the heights of heifers and body condition score them instead of weighing them. I feel his is a quicker and more accurate way of assessing a heifer program. We do not like to have young heifers with a greater than 3.0 body score but rather prefer to keep them around 2.7. There have been several reports that show that young heifers that are too fat at the time they reach puberty, lay down excess fat in the udder and these replace the epithaelial that produce milk. These animals give approximately 27% less milk than they would have if they had not been over fed in energy. This explains why some of our heifers raised on corn silage have gotten too fat and have never really performed as well as they should have. Once a heifer is pregnant, then we try to increase her body score up to 3.2% at the time of calving but not any heavier than that. I have stated that she needs this energy reserve in order to reach peak production but when we look at the lactation curves, heifers don't peak as high as cows so they don't have this tremendous need for an energy reserve the same as older cows. Also, heifers, because they have not calved before, have a narrower pelvic canal and if we get them too fat, one of the places that they will store this fat is in the pelvic canal and will give us more problems at the time of calving. So remember, growing heifers — a condition score of 2.7-3.0 and then have them up to about 3.0-3.2 at calving and if we treat springing heifers like older cows and put them on a dry cow ration 6-8 weeks before calving, they seem to come on feed better and they still follow a normal lactation curve.