

Cattle Feeders Accept Challenge

MICHELLE RANCK
Farming Staff

NEW HOLLAND (Lancaster Co.) — If you can't judge a book by its cover, it seems you can't always judge a steer by its color... or size, or conformation. After participating in the "Fantasy Beef Quality Challenge," producers learned that cattle value is not a always a black-and-white issue.

About 100 cattle feeders and industry representatives learned valuable lessons about visual appraisal and its link to net return as they participated in the con-

test during the Cattle Feeder's Summer Workshop at Yoder's Restaurant in New Holland.

As part of an effort to educate and improve profitability in the cattle feeding industry, Penn State Cooperative Extension, the Pennsylvania Beef Council, and nine agribusiness companies sponsored the event.

The contest, developed at Texas A&M University, is part of an industry-wide push to zero in on beef quality. One of the goals of the program include determining participants' ability to judge growth potential, carcass

quality and profitability of feeder calves. The lesson, then, was to illustrate the difficulty of accurately judging cattle visually.

As in many real life situations, participants had only visual appearance and initial feeder calf weight and value to select the top steers.

Participants warm up for the event by going through the Texas contest. After choosing five "winners" and five "losers" out of a field of 24 cattle, producers were able to see how each steer performed.

The next step, then, was to

evaluate a field of seven random steers fed at Herr Angus in Nottingham and sold on grid pricing to Moyer Packing, where the cattle were evaluated and slaughtered.

Intervet representative John McFadden advised paying careful attention to frame size, thickness of muscling, and body condition in predicting net return on the animals.

"We'd like you to think about Quality and Yield grade, average daily gain, dressing percent, and ribeye area to determine profit that you would get from each

steer," explained Hughes. "What we're going to ask you to do is predict net return, or what you think the cattle will make in return or loss."

Each steer was put up individually on the screen with the background information of the steer's weight upon purchase, the price paid for the animal, and the number of days on feed. The cattle were photographed halfway through the feeding program.

Net return was the dollar value of the steer minus the cost of finishing the steer. Final costs

were estimated at \$8 per head for processing, \$40 to \$50 yardage costs, and 88 cents to \$1.05 per head per day for feed costs.

Each participant ranked what they believed to be the top five of the seven cattle. Only three participants picked the top steer as their number one rank. No one had an exact ranking, but John Bowman of B&R Cattle Company in Marietta had the first four ranked correctly.

According to an article by Don Hale, Joe Paschal, and Rob Maddock, project leaders from Texas A&M, the fantasy challenge illustrates that both good and bad cattle come in many different packages, so the outside physical characteristics will not always accurately predict the bottom line: net return.

Preconceived ideas about cattle types may prove to be a hindrance to picking an animal for performance, according to the authors. Also Quality grade, while an important component of the animal's end value, may not completely reflect the bottom-line dollar value.

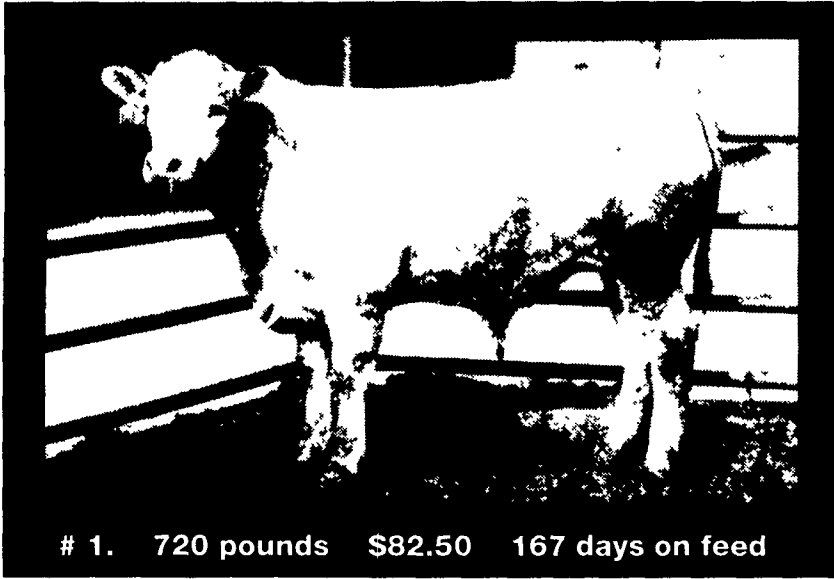
In truth, value is a result of variables which include health, average daily gain, feed efficiency, initial feeder calf price, Quality and Yield Grades, and dressing percentages.

The authors hoped to show through the contest the difficulty of predicting value by visual estimation. Although this is an important key of cattle selection, cattle with known background and health history would improve feedlot profits.

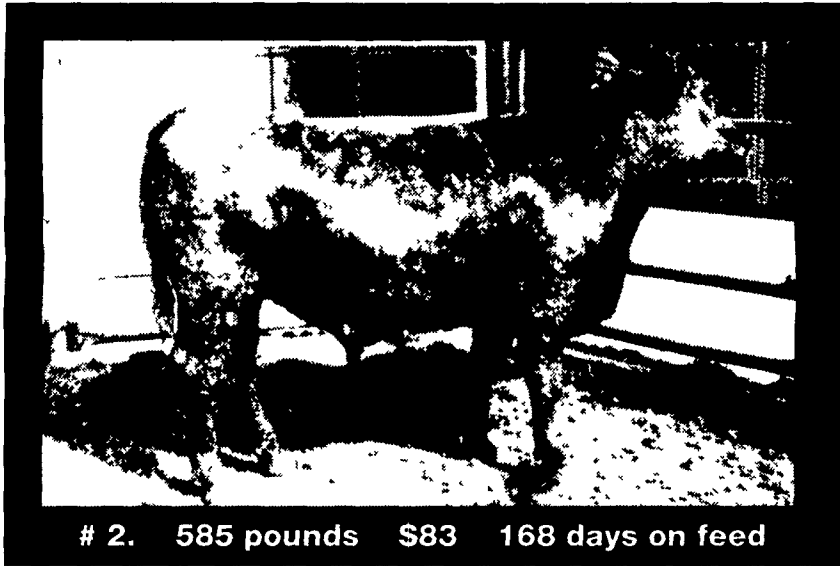
The only way to get this background and history, however, is by individual animal identification. This management tool may prove to be key in the future of

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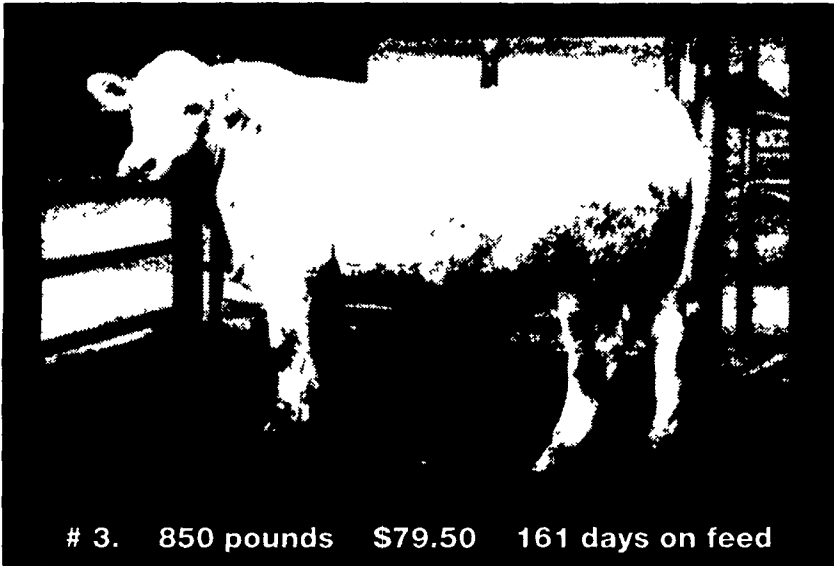
Here is your chance to try out your visual appraisal skills. After filling in the blanks with your estimation of how the cattle would perform, chose the top five animals and rank them, one being the best. The weight shown is the weight of the steer upon purchase. Steers numbered 2, 4, and 5 were on pasture an additional 98 days before entering the feedlot. The dollar value is the initial feeder calf value and the final number is the number of days the steer was in the feedyard. The results may be surprising, as they were to many of the participants. A score card is included with the rest of the story.



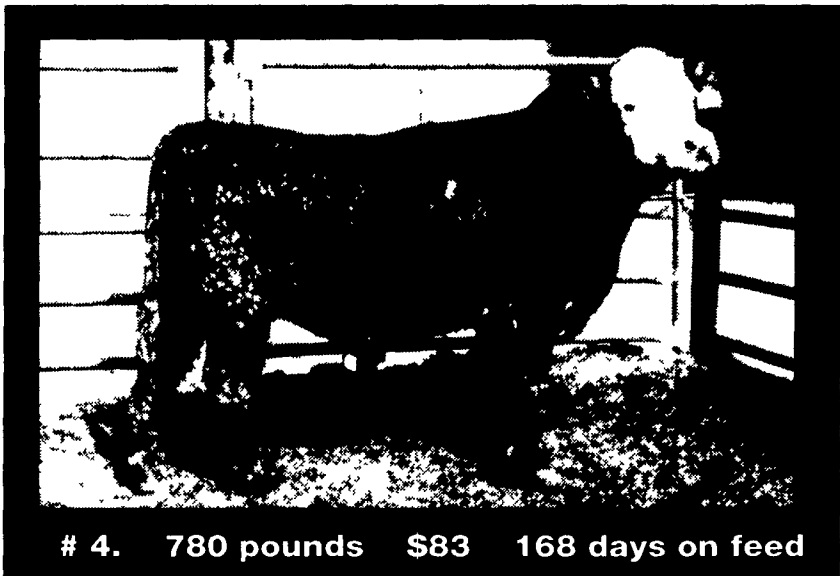
1. 720 pounds \$82.50 167 days on feed



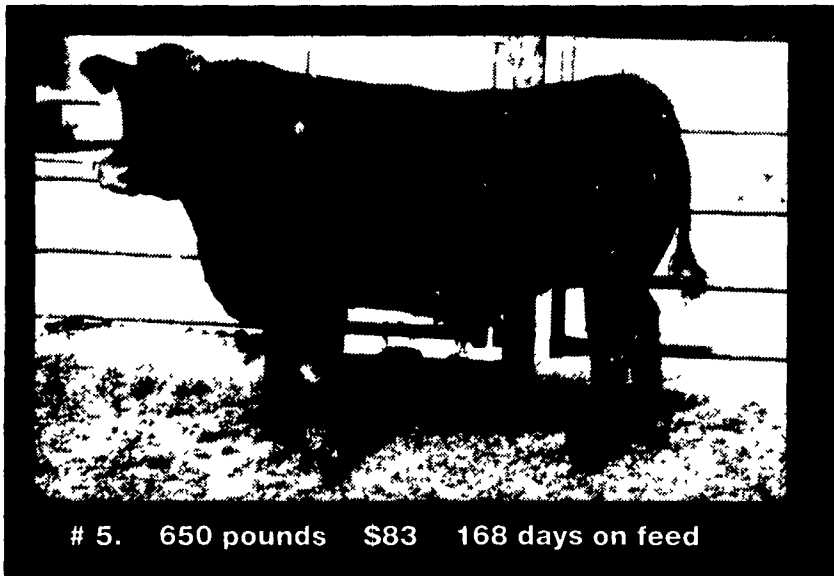
2. 585 pounds \$83 168 days on feed



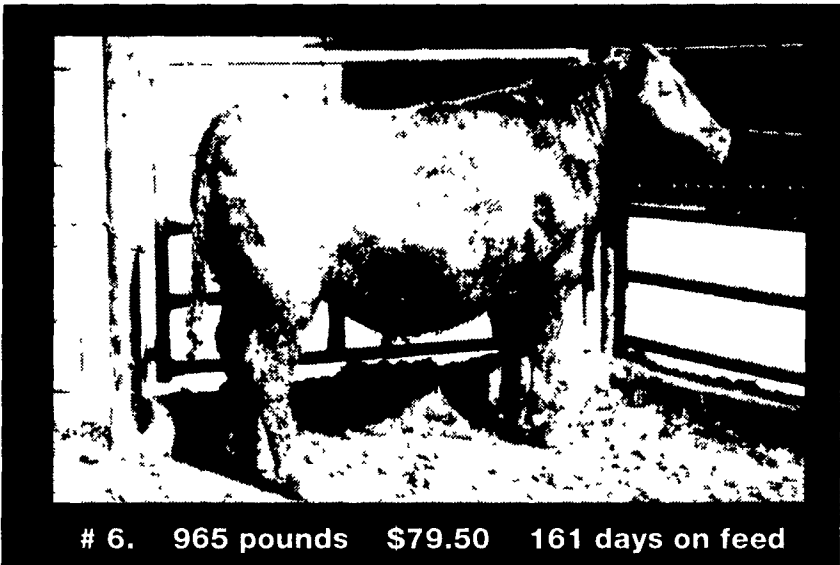
3. 850 pounds \$79.50 161 days on feed



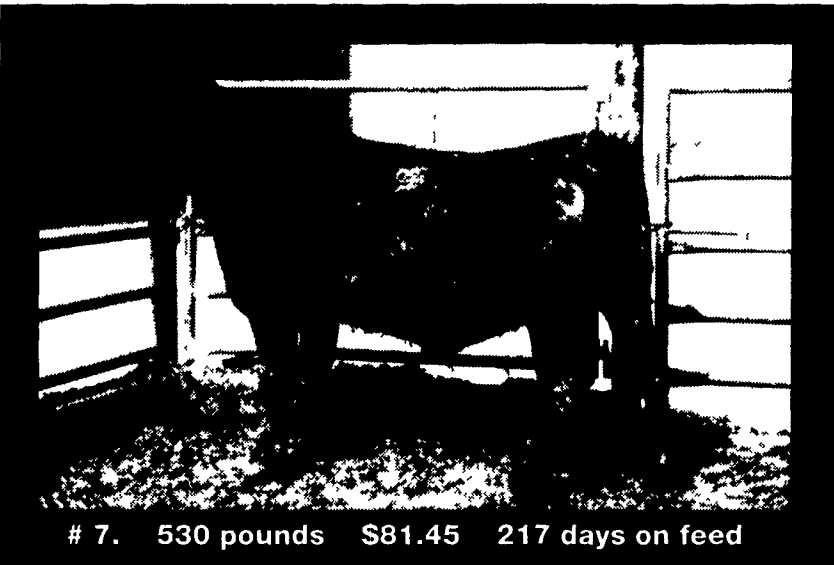
4. 780 pounds \$83 168 days on feed



5. 650 pounds \$83 168 days on feed



6. 965 pounds \$79.50 161 days on feed



7. 530 pounds \$81.45 217 days on feed