

Why Balancers®?

Crossbreeding made easy.

*Wayne Vanderwert, Ph.D.
AGA Executive Director*

Hybrids. It started with single-cross corn; it has dominated broiler and swine production, the state conservation department releases hybrid game fish, and now the car companies are promoting hybrids. All for the same reason, there are advantages to hybrids.

The movement to hybrid seedstock in beef production is in its infancy and increased usage in commercial beef production is inevitable. Why...because hybrids simplify many of the challenges a commercial beef producer faces and increase profitability. Hybrids also stabilize breed composition; in turn that provides more, not less, consistency in a calf crop.

I remember sitting in Beef Production class and a number of Animal Breeding classes while the professor diagramed crossbreeding systems for beef production. I caught myself wondering how anyone could sleep through such a stimulating lecture. It's all about heterosis, breed complementarity, maternal heterosis and potentially utilizing terminal breeds, what could be better? I've since figured out it was all about maximizing complexity, ignoring simplicity and real-world application...the smartest students may have been the ones napping.

Let's take a look at a basic two-breed rotation. The textbook model assumes that you'll have bulls of each breed and separate your cows into two breeding groups based on their sire breed. In big herds, where it is feasible, it requires extra labor to sort cows and calves, making sure you don't split a pair, and it doesn't fit with improved management practices like rotational grazing. The three-breed textbook model, to take full advantage of maternal heterosis, is just one step more complicated.

The reality approach in most herds is to buy a bull of one breed use him two years and then replace him with one from the second breed. This is especially true in small, single herd sire cowherds, but for simplicity even many big herds rotate breeds every other year. Keeping replacement females every cycle in this system means the resulting calf crop has a variety of percentages, from 50% and up, of the sire breed used in that cycle. How does that provide consistency?

The temptation might be to consider straight breeding commercial cows. But the merits of crossbreeding are too great for a commercial cattleman to ignore. Crossbreeding provides heterosis in many traits but in particular the traits that are the most difficult to apply selection pressure for improvement. Cow longevity, lifetime productivity and calf survivability, are examples where heterosis can give a 25 percent or higher advantage.

The heterosis advantages in growth and milk are smaller, and in carcass traits we see little hybrid vigor. In these traits breed complementarity, combining breeds with offsetting strengths and weaknesses comes to play.

As a commercial producer, if I had straight-bred or high-percentage British cattle, I'd use Gelbvieh bulls until I had some Gelbvieh influence in a majority of my cowherd. At that point, I'd switch to Balancers® to stabilize the level of Gelbvieh and British in my herd at a desirable level.

Under this scenario, the skeptics argue that somehow the parent breeds will genetically segregate in the offspring, yielding more variability, but this just isn't the case. Consistency in the calf crop comes from the progeny being very similar in breed composition.

The data from the Gelbvieh Alliance and Meat Animal Research Center agree that combining continental and British influence at the right levels pay big dividends in feed efficiency and targeting a desirable, and profitable, level of Yield and Quality grades.

In the pasture, Gelbvieh influence in your cowherd that will provide great fertility, milk and growth, while keeping mature cow size in check.

There is a reason commercial beef producers appreciate the advantages of Balancer bulls. They take the headaches out of crossbreeding, provide heterosis, and let producers focus on the windows of acceptability for feedlot performance and end product merit. Balancers are the easy shortcut to profitability.