

Generating Profit With Limousin: Let's Count the Ways

by Kyle Haley, Editor, Limousin World

While most breeds of beef cattle would love for cattlemen to believe they are the answer, the fact is one breed cannot be all things to all people. Each of the more than 50 breeds currently in North America have distinct advantages and disadvantages. However, some breeds are definitely in a better position than others when it comes to serving in a variety of roles within our complex beef industry. The Limousin breed, for instance, can't lay claim to having the highest milk output or the most pounds of weaning growth. What the Limousin breed can do is pack a multitude of economically relevant traits into a single package while keeping the balance and flexibility needed to succeed in the beef industry of the future. A claim very few other breeds can substantiate. Let's count the ways.

Calving ease. Without a doubt, calving ease is one of the traits upon which the Limousin breed was founded on this continent. Relative to growth, the Limousin breed remains a calving-ease leader. What's more, genetic trends indicate that, as a whole, the Limousin breed has increased weaning and yearling growth while keeping its advantages in calving ease. Which is important because any cattleman will tell you a calf born dead doesn't weigh much at weaning.

Calf vigor. Once calves are safely on the ground, the main objective becomes growth. Limousin-influenced calves are born easily and hit the ground ready to nurse and begin growing. Cattlemen the world over have commented about how much their Limousin-sired calves develop in the first 30 to 60 days.

Uniformity. Go to any sale barn in the country and you'll see just how important uniformity is. Limousin genetics are both non-spotter and non-diluter, resulting in no spots, no grays, etc. Whether its red or black, Limousin-influenced cattle provide the solid color pattern buyers look for.

Feed efficiency. Feedyard managers and owners of Limousin finished cattle can attest to the advantages in feed efficiency inherent to Limousin-influenced cattle. Limousin's advantages in feed conversion come as a result of lower levels of feed consumption coupled with comparable or higher levels of lean, dressed carcass weight and retail yield. Simply stated, unless you are selling feed, it's not how much feed is consumed, it's how efficiently that feed is converted to pounds of red meat.

Red-meat yield. While dressing percentage can be misleading (fat counts, too), Limousin is recognized as an industry leader when it comes to yielding the most saleable red meat. With the implementation of instrument grading to predict yield grade more closely, and with the growing popularity of case-ready beef, many industry experts predict more emphasis and larger premiums will be placed on red-meat yield in the near future. The Limousin advantage in feed efficiency, combined with their industry-leading levels of red meat yield, can best be summed in three words: *muscle growth efficiency*.

Maternal efficiency. Many cattlemen currently using percentage-Limousin females in their herds know just how underrated the Limousin female is in terms of her production capability. When looked at in terms of biological efficiency, the Limousin-influenced female under varying feed conditions is unsurpassed. In a five-year study, the Limousin females fluctuated the least and finished second in terms of efficiency, regardless of available feed. When combined with calving ease, optimum milk, moderate size and longevity, the Limousin-cross female has a well-earned place in the herds of commercial cattlemen.

Market flexibility. The variety of Limousin genetics found within the breed allows producers to build products that will fit virtually any marketing avenue. High-percentage Limousin calves fit many of the industry's lean-beef niches, while the percentage-Limousin feeder calf fits the programs where both grade and yield are rewarded.

Selection. There is strength in numbers. Dependable Limousin genetics are available from thousands of reputable firms around the country. Additionally, genetics are available for producers wishing to utilize Limousin either as a terminal sire or in a situation where females are retained as replacements.

Palatability and tenderness. Research has shown that marbling has less than a 15 percent effect on tenderness and palatability. Further research has shown that, while Limousin might lack the high levels of marbling found in other breeds, tenderness and palatability of Limousin beef remain at high levels. That is due to the finer muscle fibers found in Limousin-influenced beef as compared to other breeds. It also explains the Colorado State University research that reveals an edge in tenderness for Limousin beef. That study, conducted in the mid-1990s, produced data showing Limousin beef in the Select grade was more tender than other beef of the same grade. Furthermore, CSU research showed Limousin beef was substantially more tender when compared to the results of the National Beef Tenderness Survey. Given its acceptable levels of tenderness and palatability, in concert with its low levels of fat and cholesterol relative to many of the other available beef products, Limousin beef is perfectly suited for today's health-conscious consumer, who still demands a good eating experience. In fact, several growing branded beef programs featuring lean products rely on Limousin genetics to supply their demands and satisfy their customers.

NALF marketing programs. The North American Limousin Foundation's (NALF's) commercial marketing program has a myriad of marketing options aimed at helping users of Limousin genetics garner a profit for their Limousin-cross calves. For example, special Limousin feeder-calf sales have proven that substantial premiums are available when sellers meet up with buyers seeking Limousin genetics.

NALF genetic evaluation, performance and research programs. NALF is a leader in the beef cattle industry in terms of both defining and improving the genetic predictability and performance from conception to consumption. From the generation of economically relevant expected progeny differences (EPDs) to progeny testing and ultrasound scanning for carcass traits to participating in multibreed research projects, the Limousin breed's national organization is dedicated to making certain the breed remains an industry leader.

Serving capacity. Serving capacity, which is defined as the number of services a bull performs in a pasture-mating situation, is economically important for several reasons. First, bulls with high serving capacities can be placed in higher-than-normal cow-to-bull ratios and still produce acceptable pregnancy rates. Second, in single-sire breeding situations, a bull with a higher serving capacity can generate higher pregnancy rates in the first 25 days of a 60-day breeding season. Therefore, using bulls with high serving capacities result in both higher pregnancy rates and tighter calving seasons. In a study conducted in Australia in the early 1990s, a veterinarian and noted animal-reproduction specialist stated, "I know of no other breed with a higher serving capacity than Limousin." That statement has been backed by scores of cattlemen whose Limousin bulls share pastures with bulls of other breeds. Also, relative to semen quality, a noted individual at a reputable semen company serving all breeds often has commented on how Limousin semen, on the whole, exceeds the others in terms of overall semen quality, with higher numbers of live cells, better motility and morphology.

Longevity. While the majority of the data regarding the longevity of Limousin bulls and females can be traced back to "cowboy comments" about how long their bulls and females remain active, the Limousin breed is one of only three breeds to utilize an EPD for stayability. The stayability EPD predicts genetic differences in the likelihood that daughters will remain in production past 6 years of age.

Size. *Optimum* is the key word when it comes to frame size. Two separate research projects conducted by the U.S. Meat Animal Research Center show Limousin cattle stack up favorably when compared to the other major beef breeds. When actual weights and hip heights were compared among females, 2–7 years old, Limousin females weighed less and were smaller in stature than each of the females representing the major Continental breeds. In a separate study looking at carcass traits measured in the cooler, Limousin produced larger ribeyes with smaller carcasses as compared to their Continental counterparts. In addition

to having smaller carcass weights, the Limousin steers also had lower liveweights, which would indicate they were also more moderately sized individuals.

Milking ability. Again, *optimum* is the key word when discussing milking ability. While the problems associated with low levels of milk are obvious, extremely high levels of milk can be equally detrimental to the bottom line. Beef females who milk like Holsteins are known to have higher maintenance requirements, are harder to breed back on schedule, and have more incidence of teat and udder problems – all resulting in females not as likely to remain in the herd as long as their moderate-milking counterparts. Genetic trends for the Limousin breed suggest that tremendous strides have been made, improving milking ability. Furthermore, when USMARC measured 12-hour milk yield and 200-day milk yield among six of the top 10 beef breeds, Limousin females fit nicely in the middle of both milking-ability categories.

Self-scrutiny. People within breed circles – and those looking in from the outside – have always said the real strength of the Limousin breed is its people. In fact, the breed's biggest strength might be the willingness of Limousin breeders to take a good, honest look at the breed as a whole, identify both strengths and weaknesses, then vow to make a unified effort to make improvements where needed. The Limousin breed arrived in this country 40 years ago with much to offer the beef cattle industry. However, with the good came some bad. But, for the last 40 years, Limousin seedstock producers have not been shy about confronting those weaknesses head on and doing something about them. The result is a Limousin animal that has changed for the better and one somewhat different than what your father or grandfather might recall from four decades ago.

The ways in which Limousin can be an integral link in the beef production chain are many. Is Limousin the perfect breed? No. There is no such breed. Is there work yet to be done within the breed? Definitely. But the Limousin breed of today brings a host of economically important traits to the table while avoiding the extremes that can rob profit. As a breed, Limousin continues to strive to maintain its advantages in certain areas while improving upon other facets relative to overall profitability. The result is a breed very much in balance with the demands of our future beef industry. A breed that has the necessary tools to help cattlemen, feeders, packers and retailers generate profits.

Updated June 2009