

News Column
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CALVING – WHEN TO INTERVENE

My heart dropped when I saw the big swollen head and huge swollen tongue. I had no idea how long the heifer had been trying to calve but I immediately knew we had a wreck on our hands.

It wasn't the first time I had seen a calf with a swollen tongue, caused by too much time in the birth canal and the mother not being able to finish the job on her own. It was, however, my first time seeing only a dry head and huge swollen tongue sticking out.

A dry head! How long had she been like this?

I was immediately sick to my stomach, knowing this wasn't going to be an easy pull, and knowing the calf was already dead. There was no time to cry though and there was no reason to swear. The damage was done and we needed to get busy and try to save the heifer.

Those with experience might expect this heifer to be worn out, weak, and easy to catch. Some cows and heifers in this situation would even be paralyzed,... but not this one. Instead, she was the high-headed kind that could still outrun me, even with a big calf's head sticking out of her backside and that monstrous swollen tongue flopping side to side with every stride.

Keep in mind that this was 40 years ago. I was still young and should have been able to keep up with a pregnant heifer fairly easily. This one still had some energy though – maybe I should have recognized that as a good sign.

We did, of course, get her corralled and Dad and I settled into our established roles in the

delivery process. Dad worked up close, hooking up chains and fishing out feet. I worked six feet away, operating the crank on the calf puller.

I don't recall what the problem was – probably a foot that just wasn't positioned quite right – but this didn't turn out to be a difficult delivery at all. At least I don't remember bending the puller.

What I do remember vividly is the calf hitting the ground,...and breathing. That sucker was still alive!

Now, if you had seen his tongue – swollen up, puffed up, and about three times normal size – you would understand the irony in my calling him a sucker. I didn't think he would ever be able to suck.

It isn't often that these stories have a happy ending but this one does. The calf was alive. He got up, and he nursed on his own when his swollen tongue returned to normal size within a couple of hours.

As is probably the case for many of you, we always liked it best when the first sign of parturition we noticed was a newborn calf already up and nursing. The next best scenario would be to arrive when a water bag first protrudes.

Your vet will tell you there are three stages of parturition. Stage one is dilation of the cervix. This stage takes days and you may not even notice it. What you might notice is a cow pawing the dirt or straw, preparing a place to calve.

Stage two of parturition is the actual delivery of the calf and starts with appearance of the water bag. On average it takes just 70 minutes from the start of stage two until a calf is born. Some calves will be born within just minutes of the water bag first protruding.

During stage two there should be observable progress every 15 to 20 minutes. Advice

from veterinarians is to intervene if a calf is not born within two hours after the onset of stage two (water bag present), or sooner if no progress is observed during those two hours.

Stage three is the delivery of the placenta and should occur with eight to 12 hours after the calf is born. If the placenta is not delivered within 12 hours, do not forcibly remove it. (Note that this is different from what vets did 40 years ago.) Instead, administer antibiotics if the cow acts sick.

The key point is to intervene within two hours after observing a cow in labor, with either a water bag or feet protruding being the signs signaling when to start the clock.

If you have questions you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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