

News Column

by Greg McClure, KSU-Riley County Extension Agriculture Agent
110 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, KS 66502

For Release 08/15/16
Phone: 785/537-6350
Fax: 785/537-6353

COW SIZE

There's a picture of my dad on the wall in Weber Hall, home of the Animal Science Department at Kansas State University. Dad was a member of the 1952 Kansas State College livestock judging team and, like his son, he apparently had an unremarkable livestock judging career.

Looking through some additional pictures in online archives (discovered with a Google search), it looks like Dad had trouble cracking the top five on his team and didn't get to judge at some of the major contests. However, I did learn that he was 5th high individual at Oklahoma City that year. That's something I didn't know.

When I'm in Weber Hall, I like to look at the judging team pictures, mostly because Dad is in one of them, but I also enjoy looking at the livestock in some of those pictures. Many of the pictures taken in the 1950s show team members standing behind a beef steer. Those steers, fully grown and ready for market, are about two inches taller than the team members' belt buckles.

Today, the average cow weighs 1390 pounds, according to data from the USDA Meat Animal Research Center at Clay Center, Nebraska. That won't surprise a lot of producers, if they have looked at the weights of the cull cows they have been running through the local sale barn.

What might surprise some though, is which breeds are the biggest. Any guesses? How about Charolais and Simmental? Those cattle are big, for sure.

Unless you've been looking at the USDA-MARC data, you probably wouldn't guess that

Hereford cows have the highest mature weight, averaging 1419 pounds. That's a five-year-old weight at a body condition score 5 -- average condition, not fat and not thin.

In second place in the heavy cow competition is the Angus breed, weighing 1410 pounds, followed by Red Angus at 1409 pounds. Simmentals ranked fourth at 1404 pounds. Limousin cows weighed in at 1391 pounds, followed by Charolais at 1371 pounds, and Gelbvieh at 1323 pounds.

Breed	5-year-old weight (lbs.)
Hereford	1419
Angus	1410
Red Angus	1409
Simmental	1404
Limousin	1391
Charolais	1371
Gelbvieh	1323

So, why should you care about cow weights and which breeds have the biggest cows? First, cow weights are important in determining stocking rates. If you're still putting the same number of cows on 160 acres as you put in that pasture in 1970, you're probably over-stocking.

Next, if your calf weaning weights haven't increased in proportion to your cow size, then you have a problem. Big cows aren't necessarily a problem, as long as they wean a big calf and breed back year after year. But, if they don't breed back, then there is a problem.

And, the reason you should care which breed has bigger cows is so you can make informed decisions in your crossbreeding program. Instead of choosing a breed because you think the cows will have a lighter mature weight, you may need to seek out smaller framed cattle within each breed.

While many believe 1200 to 1400 pound cows are ideal, they may or may not be ideal for your

environment. That's something you'll have to decide.

The energy required to maintain a 1400 pound cows is only about 11% greater than the energy required to maintain a 1200 pound cow, even though the 1400 pound cows is 16% heavier. If you're getting an increase in total calf weight that is greater than 11%, then the big cows might work.

Now, some of you are ahead of me and you know that 11% more calf weight might not translate to 11% more income because bigger calves sell for a lower price per pound. You're right! So, you do the math and decide what works for you.

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 gmclure@ksu.edu.

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.