

By Jeremy Engh

The ADCA held its annual meeting in Hopewell New Jersey this past September. The meeting was hosted by Jon and Robin McConaughy of Double Brook farm and was well attended with the headline speaker, Temple Grandin, stealing the show. Dr. Grandin is the foremost authority in the world on animal behavior and handling systems and she did not disappoint. Following Dr. Grandin and a delicious meal, guests were treated to the prescreening of a new film titled, "American Meat", directed by Graham Meriwether who was also on hand.

One week later in Rock Falls Illinois, Charlie and Martha Trantham led sales at the annual NADA event with old American genetics tracing back to the Lufton Guardsman line imported into the US from the UK in the late 70's. Sale averages were higher than normal and this trend has continued around the country with Devon cattle continuing to demand premium prices.

Grass fed beef continues to be the fastest growing organic commodity in this country and the Devon continues to capture a large portion of market share. With an unstable economy livestock seems to be a better investment than Wall Street and Devon breeders have a window of opportunity to present information to potential breeders/investors and capture those dollars available for investment. I was contacted by a large buyer just last week who told me that his chefs no longer want Certified Angus Beef (which is now sold in McDonalds as well as restaurants) but they are now demanding heritage beef breeds and more specifically Devon.

The Devon Breed is admired for maintaining the desirable traits in its cattle despite fads which have plagued other breeds. We are all aware of the tools available for cattle assessment, EBV's, ultrasound, linear measurement to name a few. There is no doubt that these tools make wonderful cattle evaluation tools. But, what have breeders done with these tools? History would show that far too many breeding programs have been driven by fads that take traits to the extreme. Today, in the U.S., Angus cattle are the biggest framed cattle in show barns. It appears the extremes that occur in the show ring are now being transferred to performance traits and indexes. In the Devon breed however we have the opposite trend. Cattle are selected for lack of size and muscling alone. Most breeders in the U.S. have little understanding of EBV's, ultrasound data, and production records. How can someone pay \$10,000 or more for an animal without knowing if she has calved every year? More importantly what has she produced? Many cattle are selected for purchase or flushing based on pedigree or phenotype alone with no attention paid to performance. This is dangerous for new breeders especially as the best looking Devon in many herds is the one that slipped a calf the previous year.

Let us remember what a Devon is supposed to do. Devon are moderate sized cattle which should be able to be finished on grass alone. Above all, they must be excellent cows with outstanding reproduction, longevity, low maintenance, and docility. Devon must be trouble free and capable of weaning a calf that is a high percentage of their body weight. Devon should hang average size carcasses that will grade a very high percent USDA Choice with as few USDA Yield Grade 4s and 1s as possible. I worry almost as much about the 1s as the 4s because the last thing a producer wants to do is put the heifer mates of Yield Grade 1 steers back in the herd, because they won't make good cows. Maintenance requirements are a function of body size (actually surface), visceral and organ mass. High milk cattle have been shown to have more visceral and organ mass which gives them higher maintenance requirements, even when they are not lactating. Breeders who have a history of success with the Devon breed have kept the Devon true to its form, medium size cows with milk adaptable to a wide range of environments and reasonable growth.

With tremendous growth potential, many animals are no longer candidates to be grass fed and must be grain fed. With record grain prices of recent years due to Ethanol production among other things, feedyards are looking to background as many cattle as possible to put on cheap gains before putting cattle into the lot. This creates a huge opportunity for Devon bulls in U.S. commercial cattle operations which are still producing beef for the feedlot. Devon cattle trump other breeds in marbling score and percent Choice. Far too many of today's seedstock producers are breeding cattle with high maintenance requirements, very high milk, lack of fertility, poor carcass quality, and an inability to be backgrounded because they are chasing too much growth. Commercial producers who do not wish to go grass fed, should be looking to Devon seedstock operations for bulls that have stayed true to basic Devon traits and will produce calves that put on reasonable gains on moderate pasture. These cattle will finish faster and cheaper in the feedlot.

Purebred Cattle breeders are famous for using quick generation intervals to make what they hope is genetic progress. Many Devon breeders using embryo transfer have even started flushing virgin heifers, sometimes to unproven bulls. By doing this, over time, you create a herd of "paper" genetics where you really do not know what you have. This is when fertility and longevity can really start to slide in a herd and even a breed. Cows need to be proven to be candidates for embryo donors and more emphasis needs to be put on longevity as a breed. Fortunately, there are still large pockets of highly fertile Devon cattle with phenomenal longevity.

Devon in the U.S. are in high demand, they perform, stay healthy and do well on grass or grain. Most importantly, there are breeders that have not chased the fads and have stayed true to the purpose of Devon cattle. They have maintained moderate size, low maintenance cows with sensible milk, high fertility and longevity, which will produce bulls that sire calves that can be grass or grain finished successfully resulting in high quality carcasses. The future for Devon continues to look great in the U.S. and hopefully as breeders come together and unify promotional efforts we can maintain age old standards while verifying quality through modern scientific techniques resulting in increased marketability and sustainable agriculture for all Devon breeders.

