

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM CENTRAL TESTING

David Huinker, Decorah, Iowa

The Central Test Station has been the very best tool that the swine industry has had in the past 20 years and will continue to be so if it is used correctly. It is essential to keep abreast of the changes and needs of our industry and to pay particular attention to the sound economic values in swine production. One thing that has hindered our progress in the past is the promotion of uneconomical traits and fads. The Central Testing Station has allowed these fads to be compared under a set of uniform conditions with tried and proven traits. One source of disappointment to me has been that when these fads are shown under these conditions, an unwise direction in which to go, these promoters instead of admitting they made a mistake, ignore the data collected, attempt to discredit the test and continue to promote the fad for their own financial gain.

In order to make the most progress, we must keep the total swine program in perspective. We test to measure the economic traits, use your eyes to measure soundness and conformation and use your head to study bloodlines.

What should we be looking for when we speak of soundness? Soundness includes those features necessary for free movement of feet and legs, but it also includes breeding soundness, size of testicles should be noted, abnormalities of the sheath or other obvious problems with reproduction. Many nonbreeding boars have small testicle size, these should be avoided. Soundness also includes underlines, 12 nipples may be all that is necessary to qualify a boar for test station and show ring purposes, however, use your eyes to make sure that they are in fact well developed and evenly spaced because these traits which are not considered in performance data are essential for reproductive efficiency. Yet, they are frequently ignored.

Studying bloodlines in relation to performance testing will allow you to select lines to use in your breeding program to maximize production, and after all, production is what it's all about. Production in terms of number of pigs born alive, number of pigs weaned, weight at weaning, number of days to market weight and feed efficiency. Do not study bloodlines based only on performance in the show ring which is done all too often. Use of test data is a useful tool for the seller as well as the buyer, both purebred and commercial. Bloodlines can be selected which will improve their herds. Both good and bad qualities can be assessed and selection made according to the needs of the herds involved.

Gain and efficiency are the two traits progressive commercial buyers pay the most attention to and rightfully so. These two traits are very important to any swine operation whether it be commercial or purebred. Two factors that can change a pig's performance are environment and health. They will interfere with the pig's ability to express his true genetic potential and for this reason every effort must be made in the central test and on-the-farm to provide the best possible environment and disease prevention program, so that test results express genetic potential and not poor management or disease stress.

Rigid health standards are essential in hog production today. If a problem arises, take care of it immediately. A minor problem can lead to a major problem in a few hours or days. Check your hogs frequently and faithfully and be on the lookout for any problems. Timely vaccinations and spraying are good management practices that are too often put off and are costly in the end

At the test station, I believe pigs should only be accepted from Pseudorabies free herds or be blood tested on the farm of origin before delivery. Once they are delivered to the station, test all pigs upon entry and again within 30 days of sale date. I believe a TGE shot, particularly through the fall and winter season, has helped considerably. Health is important before, during and after a test period. All animals that have had persistent health problems such as arthritis, pneumonia, swollen testicles, etc., should be marketed even though they may have met your requirements. These animals will probably give the new owner problems and he will be unhappy and the station could suffer also.

All boars should have a conditioning period before being sold either in a station or off the farm. After trying several methods of conditioning, I found the best method for me is to take boars off full feed and hand feed them once a day on the floor. An important thing to remember when conditioning is that most swine rations are built for a pig on full feed. When he is on full feed, he will get the necessary vitamins and minerals that he needs for maximum gain. When you limit feed him, you are also cutting his intake of vitamins and minerals. Therefore, the vitamins and minerals in the conditioning ration must be adjusted to compensate for his lower intake of feed. Conditioning a boar is important so that the new owner will not have problems when he goes to use him.

Through the use of performance testing the swine producer has made great strides in the past 25 years in improving the quality of the product he produces. Today he has a product he can be and rightfully should be proud of. Through pork promotion he has made the consumer aware of what he is capable of providing. He must make every effort to provide an equally or more acceptable product in the future.

One parting observation - be honest when dealing with fellow producers. It will pay big dividends in the long run for both you and the swine industry.