

REVITALIZING BREEDER PARTICIPATION IN CENTRAL TESTING

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Economic times have fluctuated in several directions over the past few years in the swine industry. We've seen commercial men and purebred men alike travel some very rough roads in the market place. Higher investment costs, lower profits or no profits at all. The past few months have been helpful in measuring our faith in the swine profession. But how long will this cycle last? And how can we as industry professionals smooth out the bumps and straighten out the curves of this road of unpredictability?

While working with the Yorkshire Association, I covered fourteen states and had roughly 2500 breeders in my area. About five percent of these breeders did a really good job in covering all the bases of seed-stock production (health, performance, nutrition and salesmanship).

Buying breeding stock, whether it be for the purebred or commercial producer, was not one of my easiest jobs. Not enough purebred breeders provide information on the genetics behind the product they are selling. How many times have you heard a breeder say, "That boar's out of the best sow in my herd."? But then try asking him how fast he gained or how his sire performed, or what the 21-day weight of his dam was.

Central testing and on-the-farm testing programs were tools I relied on heavily when I was helping a new breeder form a program or when buying a new sire. Commercial men don't care how many ribbons you've won, but are interested in good, healthy, sound, efficient, fast growing, lean hogs. Therefore, I encouraged breeders to put more of their attention on providing a product that would generate dollars for their customers in the feedlot, and also put a desirable product on the consumer's table. This, in turn, should generate a reasonable return on investment.

A year ago when I left the Yorkshire Association, I took the position as Manager of the Ohio Swine Evaluation Station. The testing program in Ohio is the oldest in the United States, and we test the second largest number of boars in the country. I was very pleased to have the opportunity to go to Ohio and continue working with the purebred industry. However, when I started working I found that many of the breeders in the state were disenchanted with the test station program. The facilities were old and had fallen into disrepair. The quality of the pigs tested had gone down, and breeder participation had grown lax. The need for a revitalization of the program was evident, so we began our attack to curb this negative trend.

My philosophy of managing the test station is to "raise them as if they were your own." We get excited about the performance of any pig, of any breeder, of any breed. Accuracy in our record keeping is unquestionable. We pride ourselves in providing as accurate information as can be collected. After all, the whole purpose of testing is to monitor

and measure as accurately as possible the genetic capabilities of these animals under a standardized environment.

In order to be successful, you need to breed success into the program and people around you. This past year we have allocated any spare time to physical improvements of the test facility. I found as a fieldman that the farms that were kept neat and run in an orderly fashion were the most successful in breeding stock sales. Therefore, we have tried to make the Ohio Test Station as attractive as we can make a set of livestock buildings. This was our first priority and served as an "indirect form of promotion." After all, fresh looks often generate fresh opinions.

I try to encourage all the people who work with me at the station to feel that they are a valuable cog in the program machinery. Everyone is treated on an equal basis and encouraged to perform in both the positive and negative aspects of the job. I feel pride in where you work, and how you go about doing a job is very essential to a program's success.

Sale promotion and sale success are also keys to building a strong test program. They may not be as important as the actual performance analysis, but are key tools in getting superior breeding stock out into the industry. I would like to believe that the best collection of breeding stock in the state can be found in the Ohio Test Station. However, to justify the testing program to many station participants a breakeven or payback on their investment is what keeps them testing.

How do we inform the right people about the quality of product we have available? I feel that many of the top individuals in each sale offering have breeder quality potential. Direct contact with the breed associations is important, but that added contact made by the station manager is very worthwhile, especially since he has been working with the boars all through the test period. We also use the more conventional forms of promotion: radio, livestock publications, and the sale catalogs. This sale season will be the first time that we have incorporated pictures into our catalog. We hope by displaying some of the top indexing boars visually we can pull in some added buyer interest. Also, we are planning to formulate a handout on how to handle the new boar after purchase for the buyer.

The elite breeder has always been identified as the person who provides the seedstock for other multiplier herds. I don't agree with this philosophy. The real elite breeder to me is a person who can perceive potential problem or benefit to his breed or operation and harness it. He develops a program and projects it over a long period of time, believes in it, and sticks by it even though the current trends may be different.

The breeder of the 80's will undoubtedly use some form of performance testing as a cornerstone in his herd, and I believe central test stations will play an important part of this role. Chances are very good that if a breeding stock enterprise doesn't carry a sound performance program in the 80's, he won't be a breeder in the 90's.