Canadian Luing Cattle Association Newsletter

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Message From The President

Jeff Longard

What's Canadian about Luing?

Hello, and welcome to the world of Canadian Luing cattle! Our Association was reactivated in recent years although over many years, several dedicated breeders have kept the vision alive. The fact that Luings not only exist in this country but are poised to take their place as the premier cold-climate beef producer is due mainly to the efforts of two people: Dr. Bob Church, a founder and principal breeder of Luings in this country, and a legendary font of knowledge of cattle genetics (and everything else!); and Mr Iain Aitken, our present Secretary, who brings to the breed not only a new wealth of enthusiasm but also the benefit of generations of livestock husbandry and a rare gifted stockman's insight. It was through these two gentlemen that I became involved with Luing cattle, and I've never looked back!

Luing, of course, are named after the island of Luing (pronounced "Ling") off the western coast of Scotland where the Cadzow brothers developed the breed. We owe so much to that heritage that it is perhaps easy to overlook the contributions which have been made on this side of the Atlantic - contributions which make the Canadian Luing cow unique and possibly superior to her counterparts in other countries. In my view, the advantages of Canadian Luings are twofold:

1. *A limited genetic pool skilfully developed from superior foundation stock*. In many breeds a limited gene pool is bemoaned, but it can have its plus side. Since it was very difficult and expensive to import Luings from Scotland, the animals brought to Canada tended to be the best examples of their type. Imports took place during the 1970s and early 1980s when the Scottish Luing had arguably reached its pinnacle: robust, growthy animals that still retained the hardiness of their ancestors and had not succumbed to the race to compete with the big hot-house exotics. From this foundation, breeders kept the blood lines tight enough to ensure genetic prepotency and concentration of consistent foundation character. The Canadian Luing offers a quality rare today: the power to stamp its phenotype on its offspring. With Canadian Luing, what you see is really what you get!

Luing Bonus as a rising 2-year old, on his way to Canada in 1984

2. *The contribution of the Canadian Snowlander cattle*. While the Cadzows were creating the Luing breed in Scotland, Charlie Flick and Dave Bilinski were buried in the mountains of British Columbia doing a parallel work. Like the Cadzows, they chose for their foundation cross the Shorthorn for its beef production and the Highland for its hardiness, longevity and maternal instincts. The result was the Snowlander, an animal amazing for its survival and foraging ability. Under the auspices of the Canadian Luing Association the very best of the Snowlanders were grandfathered into the breed. Today, Canadian breeders are finding that Luing cattle with a proportion of Snowlander blood are superior in many traits and some breeders are selecting to preserve and concentrate this important genetic heritage.

When we consider these two factors we realize that the Luing is not just another import, it is a breed uniquely designed for maximum quality beef production under the world's most adverse cold ranching conditions. Hats off to Denis Cadzow and his brothers, and kudos as well to the Canadian stockmen who have fine-tuned this breed for its Canadian environment.

Why Luings?

- by Iain Aitken, Secretary

Luings were first imported to Canada from Scotland in 1973 and I am disappointed to say that most beef producers in North America are unaware of the breed. In the following article I would like to share my thoughts on why the breed has not achieved wider appeal, and why I think the time is right for Luings to finally achieve the recognition they deserve.

Looking back, I think Luings perhaps arrived in Canada at an unfortunate time - at the same time as the European "exotic" breeds. These exotic cattle were undoubtedly great breeds and their influence on cattle production in North America and around the world has been revolutionary, but they were a different type of cattle to Luings and for a different purpose. The exotics could produce previously unheard of rates of gain, albeit with additional inputs. Perhaps the simultaneous development of the feedlot industry provided the ideal environment for the exotic breeds to flourish? These new cattle certainly performed well on rations utilising the abundant low cost grain available at that time. The emphasis seemed to switch quickly to this new, more intensive way of producing beef. The seed stock breeders of exotic cattle also started performance testing their young bulls on high energy feedlot rations. This seemed to make sense as bulls that grew fast on grain were very likely to sire calves that would also perform well on grain. Unfortunately it seems this method of sire production and selection became established as the norm, not only in the exotic, terminal sire breeds but in many of the maternal "British" breeds also.

The fact that every feedlot steer has a mother that earns her living by harvesting low quality roughages seems to have been overlooked by many. Ranchers chose instead to adapt their systems to accommodate the needs of heavier, higher maintenance cow herds. Supplying large quantities of mechanically harvested forage and supplements to 1500 lb cows for over 200 days a year is not uncommon in Western Canada. It seems many producers became so focussed on large weaning weights and high output prices that they did not pay enough attention to the input costs. Contrary to popular belief faster growing, larger framed cattle are not necessarily more efficient. The scientific community are now trying to address this through Net Feed Efficiency Trials which, although a step in the right direction, still do not give a complete answer. The problem, in my opinion, is that they only highlight which cattle convert grain to beef more efficiently standing in a feedlot. I would be more interested in identifying the cattle best able to convert the forage that they themselves harvest into beef.

Driving across my pasture last winter in a blizzard with a bitter wind chill, I came on a bunch of crossbred cows that had escaped from their field and were unable to get back in to seek shelter. They stood huddled behind the gate looking miserable ... the exception being one 19 year old Luing cow that was grazing in the open, with her coat entirely white on the side exposed to the blizzard. This old cow had remembered why they broke into the field in the first place - to get to the grass banked for spring pasture - and she was quite content to harvest it, despite the weather conditions that were preventing her herd mates from doing the same. This highlighted two important Luing characteristics to me - foraging ability and an insulating hair coat that is well suited to the worst of Canadian winters.

Having mentioned a 19 year old cow. I feel I should raise the issue of longevity. I believe it to be a huge (and undervalued) asset. Many producers believe that because they plan their breeding programs using Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs), every heifer calf born must be better than the previous generation. Given that most EPD selection is based on picking cattle with ever larger numbers, the cattle must be improving constantly, right? I do not buy that theory for three reasons:

1. The poor and arguably deteriorating quality of many of the beef cattle sold today;
2. Higher EPD numbers only indicate higher potential production, not more efficient production levels. Selection for ever larger growth and milk EPD numbers in most breeds across North America has led to more beef cows resembling dairy cows.

3. In the real world heifers are still unproven commodities regardless of how impressive their EPDs may be. A cow needs to have many calves over her lifetime to be profitable hence our best genetics will be in our oldest cows - the survivors, who have done everything right and are proven. It has been my experience that cattle selected for high EPD values rarely survive longs enough in a commercial situation to be profitable. High cull cow values prior to BSE probably alleviated some of the pain of culling these cows at young ages. Since 2003 we have all had an expensive lesson about the true cost of culling cows.

The main reason that cows are culled from herds is because they fail to get pregnant. There will always be some open cows but by selecting for fertility the number can be minimised. It is a well established fact that fertility is the number one factor influencing profitability in cow calf production yet many ranchers and purebred breeders disregard this. The Luing breed was founded on selection for functional efficiency by the Cadzow Brothers in Scotland. They realised that the cow's ability to wean a calf every year for at least 10 years was more important than any other trait. Since coming to Canada this emphasis on fertility and functional efficiency within the Luing breed has been maintained by breeders. Their breeding programs have propagated and preserved unique bloodlines within our breed to the extent that many of today's cattle exhibit exceptional fertility and longevity.

In my own herd I have the living proof, two 22 year old cows and one that is 21 years, all still calving regularly. We performed some embryo transfer work on the older cow last winter and retrieved 18 Grade 1 embryos which is a remarkable result given that the "industry standard" average for all cows is 6 embryos per flush.

Embryo donor at 20 years old

Globally high grain prices, currently as a result of bio-fuel industry expansion, are surely a sign of things to come as the human population continues to expand yet available farmland acres shrink. In future, it seems clear that we will not be able to afford the luxury of rearing cattle on grains that humans could eat, however, millions of acres of the world will continue to grow low quality forages as they do not suit cultivation. Beef production utilising grazing animals will remain the only viable use for this type of land and this roughage conversion role is where I believe the selection focus of all beef breeds should be.

In conclusion, I believe the future for Luings in Canada has never been brighter - as input costs rise and calf prices fall, producers with sharp pencils have already realised that the most profitable cow is the one that will go out and harvest her own forage for as much of the year as the local climate will allow. The Luing's advantage is that the breed was created specifically for this role and has been proven to excel in it. By sticking to our roots and selecting for fertility and foraging ability Luings can truly claim to be "The Cow Breed."

SELECTING CATTLE FOR EFFICIENCY

- by Jeff Longard

We're in the season of "weaning weight bragging." Whenever I meet up with cattlemen, around the feed store or the auction these days, I hear the same sort of talk: "Yeah, our calves averaged almost 750 pounds this year — how about yours?"

And I always give the same sort of answer: "I did 44½% last year at 200 days with no supplementation, and I am expecting a little better this fall." And the open-mouthed, glazed expressions I get back give me the opportunity to explain. You see, "weaning weights" can be a very important management and production indicator, but in the way people typically use them they are *far worse than useless.* They are misleading at best and an alarm of economic ruin at worst.

Weaning weights are meaningful only if they are standardized around several rigid parameters, the three most important of which are:

1. Days of age of the calf (standard is 200 or 205 days);
2. Meticulous records of feed including any extra feed for the dam, creep feed for the calves and any supplements to either (a 100% forage diet is the only way to know how they are really performing); and
3. The weight of the dam, the single factor which has the most bearing on the cost of keeping her and her offspring.

Put more simply, suppose my calves average 500 lbs and yours 750 lbs. If mine are weaned at 6 months and yours at 8 months; if mine have had cheap grass and yours have had heated barns, premium hay, grain, concentrates, licks and drugs; and if mine come from 1,250 lb moms and yours from 1,800 lb grain augers — who is farther ahead?

In this article I want to look at the third factor: the weight of the cows. Now, it is true that some cows are more efficient feed converters than others and such a trait should be selected for, but it is a reliable rule that the larger the cow, the more she eats and the less beef she produces annually as a proportion of her own bodyweight.

And here is a surprising and devastating fact. Cattlemen do not know how much their cows weigh, and their estimates are invariably far too low. For most ranchers the only time they are apprised of the enormous weight of their hellspawn is when they cull one or two at the auction, and then they will say, "Well, sure, but she was a real big one, and she hadn't been raising a calf," and so on. They don't realize that a) she was average; and b) the auction weight, due to shrinkage, is 10 to 15% lower than the actual weight. Try it — I have. Weigh your cull cows at home and then compare that to the auction weight. And while you're at it, weigh the rest of the cows, too!

What you will find out by weighing your cows at weaning time, when you are weighing your calves, is that some cows take the feed you give them and produce *beef* in the form of a decent calf — while others take the same feed and more and run it up their slab-sided shoulders and into the atmosphere. I have had cows that wean 62% of their own

A good example of cow efficiency!

bodyweight, and others as low as 28%. It doesn't matter how cute that calf is or how much you like old Daisy; if she is maintaining 1,700 lbs of herself and annually giving you 500 lbs of calf, you cannot afford to keep her. You need to select for cattle that are efficient, that consistently raise a decent percentage of their own weight as a calf each year.

There are some basic rules and some serious warnings about selecting for efficiency. The rules are:

First, <u>smaller cattle typically raise a higher percentage of their own weight in a calf.</u> A ton cow can sometimes wean a 800 lb calf, but this is an economically losing proposition compared to a 1,200 lb cow weaning a 620 lb calf. Get the cow size down!

Next, <u>digestive body types — "round, sound, and low to the ground" — will maintain themselves and their calves better in the long run than respiratory types.</u> You will find it a waste of time to select tall, Holstein-shouldered milkers for efficiency because it will cost too much to maintain their condition year-round and they will end up late or open too often to be worth keeping. The rule of thumb is that lower frame-score cattle are more efficient than higher ones.

Obviously, <u>heifers or very old cattle will be less efficient than cattle in their prime.</u> You can correct your figures by using standard breed calculations to even the playing field for the sake of comparison.

Finally, <u>work toward an average efficiency of 50%</u>. I would call that ideal. Mine as of last fall, as I said, is 44.5%, and selection since then should improve it again

this year. The lowest limit I tolerate is 35% and cows that rate that low must have some other sterling qualities; in particular, they must produce daughters that are better than they are.

And now the warnings. There are only two:

There is a downward as well as an upward practical limit to cow size. Downsizing adult weights will instantly increase apparent efficiency, however, at some point the calves may end up too small for practical marketing. And you want a dam that is big enough to maintain her condition through a tough winter. My herd averages 1,235 lbs, and I find that about 1,000 lbs is the low limit. If you go smaller than that with the moderate breeds, you are losing ruggedness and spring of rib. If you like them very small, try Lowline or Dexter.

Selecting for efficiency is ONLY ONE tool. If you make it your most important criterion you are headed for trouble. Simply put, selecting for cattle that wean the highest percentage of bodyweight is selecting for *milkers*. If that is your primary value you will end up with a herd of heavy-milking, high-maintenance cattle that struggle with fertility, condition, beef production and longevity. The first ten rules of good cattle breeding are: Avoid single-trait selection! In today's skewed world that means simply avoid selecting for size of weaned calf! It is one thing to select for calf size, quite another to select for calf's percentage of dam's weight. And there is a difference between using efficiency as one tool among many, and selecting only for efficiency. My point is that as you choose to retain those deep-bodied, well-fleshed cattle that are highly fertile and dependable, you cannot neglect to examine their overall cost of keep, which in a word is how big they are, nor can you neglect how much of that cost of keep they return to you in the form of pounds of beef produced each year.

Happy weaning — brag to your friends about this year's percentages!

LUING CATTLE FOR SALE

There are only a limited number of Luing cattle for sale in Canada so if you are interested please contact the breeders soon as they are all sold on a first come-first served basis. The Association also has semen available for Canada and the USA, please contact the Secretary for details.

Lochend Luing Ranch
Dr. R.B. Church
Telephone: (403) 208-3747

- 15 - 20 purebred Luing heifer calves, available November 1, 2007

Medicine River Luings
Mr. Iain Aitken
Telephone: (403) 843-0094

- 6 - 8 F1 Luing x Red Angus heifer calves eligible for grade registration, available November 1, 2007
- 4 purebred long yearling bulls (all polled) born April/May 2006, forage raised, available December 1, 2007

Greywood Luings
Mr. Jeff Longard
Telephone: (780) 682-3805

- 1 purebred bull (polled) born April 2006, forage raised (ran with the above bulls), available December 1, 2007

Canadian Luing Cattle Association

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