



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

The target

A set of 15 youth archers revolves on the firing line each Tuesday night from May through August, each focused on targets set at varying distances, but all with the same goal — to lay down a pattern of arrows at or near the center. My oldest son and I spent a lot of time at the range. His was an active role, while my job was to observe. Study any group of archers on the line at one time and unique differences in the approach to archery are quite clear. Successful archers are remarkably consistent in their technique, always intent, focused and disciplined.

Archery lessons

The less experienced shooters displayed a breadth of behaviors. There was the “how fast can I get my five arrows off” approach. Some were successful with the first arrow or two, but then the distractions took over and their performance went awry. Others would be wide initially but then improve the score with each subsequent arrow.

Between rounds, I joined the line of parents who retrieved arrows — most pulled from the targets, but there was certainly plenty of time spent in search of errant missiles, testimony to the challenge of consistently hitting a target.

The most fascinating part of the experience was to watch archers improve. Every single youth who developed better attitudes and behaviors through coaching and repetition became more competitive.

It occurred to me that archery had a lot to offer in providing a model for how to develop a cattle-breeding program.

- Clearly defined targets coupled with collecting and reporting the score are vital to creating an environment for continuous improvement.
- Hitting the target consistently with each arrow yields a more desirable outcome than one arrow in the bull’s-eye and the rest at the periphery or completely off target.
- Discipline, focus and consistent technique are the keys to competitive success. “Tortoises” trump “hares” in the long run.
- Wild shots create inefficiency as they lead to the investment of time and energy in finding lost arrows.

- Improvement is available to anyone who has the willingness to develop better habits.

Targeting a breeding program

The first step to successful cattle breeding is to determine the market target — whose needs will you serve?

It is essential that a seedstock provider characterize the customers with whom they wish to do business. The “build it and they will come” approach rarely works. History books are filled with short-lived cattle-breeding enterprises that failed to strategically determine the needs and wants of their customers.

Once the target is defined, metrics must be established to provide a record of performance that demonstrates the capacity to hit the defined target. The challenge is to establish a set of metrics that move product performance closer and closer to the customer’s most critical needs.

It is easy to get caught up in producing “the great one” — that sire or dam that sets the breed on fire and receives accolades typically reserved for gold medalists and rock stars. Unfortunately, those breeders who invest their resources in search of a single outlier tend to produce highly variable outcomes. While they may find the “one-hit wonder,” their overall success is typically erratic. Long-term success ultimately depends on the breeder’s ability to produce consistent offspring that fit within a defined set of performance boundaries.

Successful cattle breeders who have a record of longevity share the characteristics

of great archers — discipline, focus and consistency. The worst of all outcomes with a genetics customer is to deliver breeding stock that contribute surprises or problems — calving difficulty, poor temperament or unsoundness, to name a few. Understanding the business model of customers helps to deliver products that enhance rather than disrupt operational logistics. One of the harsh realities of breeding seedstock is that there are no sustainable shortcuts to success.

Slow and steady

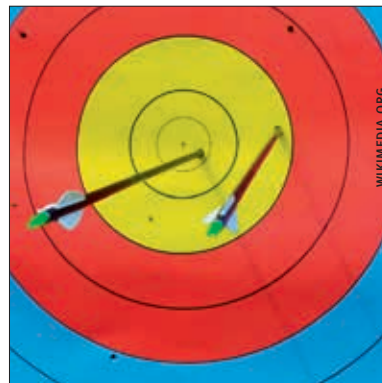
History is filled with a plethora of “hare” approaches to winning the race. While these may occasionally deliver a positive outcome in the short run, they almost never deliver in the longer term. Instead, those breeders who

approach the race from the perspective of the tortoise and who practice a patient and deliberate method have a greatly enhanced opportunity to build a business that lasts.

A shared challenge for both the producer and user of seedstock cattle is to avoid the wild shot. The incorporation of genetics that completely

miss the target into a breeding program has long-lasting consequences. Big misses are expensive in the cattle industry due to the extended production cycle that may prevent the consequence of a miss being apparent until two or three years down the road. Searching for the lost arrows is time-consuming, expensive and ultimately harmful to the relationship with customers.

The most important comparison to archery is that improvement is available to all. The tools and techniques are available and within reach — the difference lies in developing the habits of a master archer.



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