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My First 4-H Beef Calf: Extension Circular 2-60-2

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My First 4-H Beef Calf

EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE
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COOPERATING
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Suggestions for parents and Leaders

Compared with the usual 4-H beef club manual, this one may seem incomplete. It will not answer all the questions that will come up the first year that your boy or girl is in a 4-H beef club. Your experience with cattle should supplement this manual, and older members in the club can teach the beginners many things.

At the first meeting, try to cover the first few pages about getting started with the right calf. At the second meeting you might review the parts of the calf and the terms used by cattlemen in talking about beef cattle, then go on into the pages about handling the calf and getting him on feed.

You can add more from your experiences about feeds and feeding, but beginners can do very well on these simple suggestions. One of the most important lessons to learn the first year is the one about regular care and liberal feeding that every good stockman hopes his boys will learn early in life.

At every meeting and other personal contact, you cannot emphasize safety too much. Your little boys and girls are no match in physical strength for the calves they try to handle. You can help equalize the difference with your cattle "know how" and caution as you help the youngsters train their calves. It can be a pleasant and profitable experience in growing up with good livestock.
This manual is for boys and girls about 10 to 12 years old with their first beef calves. This may be your first 4-H club experience, too. You will enjoy belonging to a club, going to meetings, making tours, attending camp, showing at the fair, and other activities.

The calf you get will be your own. He should be a real pal, and he will depend on you to feed and water and take care of him. If you do a good job and he is the right kind of calf, you can be proud of him. He might win a top ribbon for you, but don’t expect too much if you compete with more experienced club members. He should make you some money if you buy him right, watch your feed costs, and sell him on a good market. You are going to learn a lot about calves and 4-H clubs regardless of whether you make or lose money.

In Nebraska 4-H club work, you can start and stop at any time, and you can begin and end your feeding of a calf for meat at any time in the year. You need not plan your project to end at a fair--it might end by slaughtering the beef for the home freezer or selling him on the local or terminal market any day that he is ready.

The usual custom for 4-H club members, however, is to start their calves in the fall or early winter and show and sell them at the county fair, a district fair, the state fair, or a market show like Omaha. As a 10 or 11 year old, you are most likely to show at your county or the nearby district show. There are some definite rules for each of the shows. These rules apply only to competition at the shows.

A calf grows while he fattens so you should plan on a long feeding period to get him finished. If you take a calf right off his mother in the fall, he should weigh about 350 pounds. The small, pony type will weigh less and the big growthy ones might weigh up to 450 or more pounds if they have had good mothers, plenty of grass and some grain in a creep. You may get a calf later in the winter. He will weigh more and cost more and your chances to make money with your own feed and work will be less.

Your first calf may be either a steer or heifer. Steers fatten more slowly than heifers. If you are starting late in the season, it might pay to try a good heifer. Some experienced 4-H leaders have urged their first-year members to feed heifers because heifers usually stay on feed a little better and do not require the forcing to get into top condition that is needed on many steers.

Make Plans - Get Ready

Before you go after a calf, you should fix up a good place to keep him and get your equipment all ready for him. The lot where he will stay should be well fenced and well drained with no mud holes in it. It should be large enough for some exercise but not so big he will run off his gains. If a water tank is in the fence line, that problem is solved; if not you might use a pipeline, a hose, or a bucket to get the water to a half barrel or similar tank in the lot or shed. The shelter need not be closed and tight. A shed open on the south that gives him a chance to lie down in the sun where it is dry and out of the wind is preferred to a tighter shed that might be drafty. Shade from trees or an open shed roof is essential in the summer time. Insulating a shed with a loft will help keep him cool and will protect him from flies. A low hay rack or bunk and a low grain trough or bunk, each about 16-18 inches from the floor, will be needed. Some members use electric fans in extremely hot weather. Two or more panels made 4 feet high and 7 to 10 feet long can be used for a catch pen if you do not have a good stall.

Since good 4-H club work includes the keeping of accurate records, you will want to keep your feed and bedding supplies separate from other feed on the farm.

The grain can be mixed in a steel drum with a shovel, on a clean smooth floor, or in a truck or wagon box with a scoop, and then stored in a bin or box or oil drum with a lid. Keep the chickens and birds and rats out of it. Most club members feed the grain by measure, using a small pail, near gallon can or coffee can, after they have determined how much the can holds of the grain mixture.

In making your plans and getting ready, you and your folks should think about how much feed and bedding it will take to finish the job. For a feeding period of eight to ten months, you will need, on the average, 15 to 20 bales of straw, a half ton of good alfalfa hay and a half ton of prairie hay. Fifty-five bushels of shelled corn, or other grains that are equal to that much corn, 400 pounds of oil meal, 30 pounds of salt, 25 pounds of bone meal, and 25 pounds of limestone will make the grain ration. Later in this circular you will read about grain mixtures and find out how you can combine corn and other grains to make the best ration.

You will need a good rope halter, a show halter, a neck rope or strap, a curry comb and brush, scrub brush and soap, small fly sprayer, and possibly a few other small items during the season.

How Good a Calf

Now, what quality of feeder calf should you get as a beginner? Any calf in good health will grow and fatten. One with desirable beef type will do better for you then one long-legged, rough, thin scrub. Even the experienced stockmen are not about to pick out next year’s champion the fall before, so you should not try too hard to do it nor pay a high premium for a calf with the championship in mind. A calf of medium quality that can be purchased at a price only a little above the market price of feeder calves, would seem to be the most practical buy for you.

The good exhibits of beefs in recent years have attracted so much attention that many ranchers and farmers have offered their annual calf crops to 4-H club members at private sale or in auctions. The boys and girls in the sandhills belong to stocker-feeder clubs and
produce feeder calves for club members in the rest of the state to feed out. Right in your home neighborhood you may have some farmer-stockman who are ready to supply the local demand for 4-H club beeves. Perhaps best of all, you have a nice calf on your own farm that your father or older brother would sell to you for this first project. Getting a calf from a long way off does not add anything to his value. In fact, shipping him some distance may set him back several days in his growth and development. Ask your folks, your leader, and your county extension agent about where you can buy a calf if one is not available close to home.

Choosing the Individual

In picking the individual calf, the breed is not as important as the type and conformation, unless you and your folks like one breed particularly well. Crossbred cattle are often good feeders but they may lack the balance and symmetry found in the best cattle of each beef breed.

Try to choose a calf with these characteristics:

General appearance: Low set, blocky, wide, deep, thickly fleshed.
Disposition: Quiet, friendly, alert but not wild-eyed and restless.
Hair coat: May be long, but should be lustrous and indicate good health.
Head: Short, wide face, broad muzzle, open nostril, deep jaw, wide open eye, clean-cut face and throat.
Neck: Short, thick, smoothly blended into the jaw and shoulder, clean crest.
Lines: Straight top and parallel bottom line, not wavy on top or cut up in front or rear flanks.
Shoulders: Smooth and compact, well blended into the neck and body.
Brisket: Square, wide between the legs, smooth, not low or coarse.
Spring of rib: Crops full behind shoulders, ribs well sprung, deep chest.
Back and loin: Broad, strong, deep fleshed, smooth, even in width from shoulders to hooks.
Hooks, rump, tail: Hooks smoothly laid in, rump level and wide, tail setting smooth, well blended, full and round.
Thigh and twist: Full, wide, deep, heavily muscled.
Legs: Bone strong but clean, shanks short, straight, well placed under each quarter of blocky body.
Skin: Loose, pliable, reasonably thick.

The Price to Pay

When you find this kind of calf your next problem is to buy him right. You may pay for him by the pound or by the head. The current market price will help determine how many dollars it will take to get him. At an auction sale you must be the last and highest bidder. At private sale, you can talk to the owner about the price until you reach an agreement. If he is reasonable, you should be able to buy the calf at the terminal market price, or a little more for high quality or the pick of the herd. Putting the calf on the scales is the best way to determine how much he weighs. Experienced stock dealers who see cattle weighed daily can guess them within a few pounds. If no scales are available, try to get a good cattleman to help you or place your confidence in the man who is selling the cattle, or you can figure that the average calf just off the cow at seven to eight months old weighs 350-375 pounds. An older calf has probably gained, after weaning, 30 to 40 pounds per month on good roughage without grain, and 40 to 50 pounds per month with roughage and some grain.
Getting the Calf Home

Your calf will not enjoy the move to his new home, and may not want to eat what you offer him. It would pay to find out what he has had to eat the last few days before you get him, and try to give him more of the same kind of feed at your place. If possible, avoid hauling the calf alone. A tame, bucket calf or a dry cow make fine companions.

In loading him, taking him home, and unloading him, plan every move you make to handle him without scaring him or making him angry, and give him no chance at any time to break away. Move slowly and quietly so neither you nor the calf get excited. Unload into a strong chute and pen and take him to his new home lot and shed with no chance to run through fences or get away. If this is not possible, jump him out of the truck on some deep bedding in the lot or shed where he is to stay. Do not try to handle him with ropes and halters if he is not accustomed to them.

Give him clean, fresh prairie hay unless you know that he has had other types of roughage. Provide some clean water. Bed the stall or shed so he can lie down where it is dry to rest. Leave him alone except to notice that he is getting along all right. He is very likely to bawl until he squeaks and refuse to eat or drink for several hours. It is better for him to be out in the sun than to be shut up in a dark stall.

Try Two Together

Suggestions so far in this circular have been about selecting one calf, which is what generally happens when a young member starts his first project. Actually, it is more practical to feed two or more calves together, and bringing the calf or calves home and getting them started on feed is much simpler when two or more calves from the same place are brought together. They are less scared and settle down more quickly than one lonesome calf by himself. Two members in the same family might try the project together, or one member can have two calves of his own.

Starting on Grain

Eating grain may be a new experience for your calf. It will not pay to hurry him or force him to eat grain. After he is eating hay and drinking regularly and his droppings are about normal, give him a small feed of new hay and put two or three handfuls of bran or whole oats in a little pile on top of the hay. He may pull out the hay and leave the grain the first time or two. When a calf does not eat a little grain after three or four days, you might turn a home grown calf that is eating grain in with him for a few days. It is surprising how fast one calf will learn from the other. Then you can feed the hay in one rack and the grain in a trough or bunk, increasing the amount of bran and oats about a fourth pound per day as long as he will clean it up readily. Decrease the bran, increase the oats, and add just a little corn. Coarsely cracked corn is much better than fine meal. Calves will do quite well on whole shelled corn. Some feeders prefer corn and cob meal at the start of the feeding period.

Suggested Grain Rations

| Corn and cob, coarsely ground | 10 parts | w/ alfalfa hay (early feeding period) |
| Oats or bran or both | 1 part |
| Protein pellets | 1 part |

| Corn, shelled or cracked | 7 parts | w/ prairie hay |
| Oats | 1 part |
| Protein pellets | 1 part |

| Corn, shelled or cracked | 5 parts | w/ prairie hay |
| Barley, ground or rolled | 5 parts |
| Protein pellets | 1 part |

The protein feed can be meal or cubes or flakes instead of pellets, and the kind may be either soybean, linseed, or cottonseed, or a combination of them. In buying any sacked feed like oil meal or bran, pay attention to the analysis tag and figure how much the protein in the bag costs per pound. Feeding tests at experiment stations show that any one of the oil meals is as good as a combination of them for cattle.

Salt and Minerals

Fix a salt and mineral box out of the weather. Put salt in one part and a mixture of five parts bonemeal, five parts limestone, and one part salt in the other part of the box. Let your calf help himself. You will need no other mineral feed.
During the first few months your calf will eat more pounds of hay than grain, but when you have him on full feed of grain he will need only about five pounds of hay per day. Use more alfalfa at the start and more prairie hay near the end of the feeding period.

If your calf starts on grain at about the normal rate, he should be eating two or three pounds of bran and oats per day at the end of the first month. In another month he will probably be eating two to three pounds of oats and about a pound of corn and cob meal per day. From that time on you can increase the corn a little each day until the calf is getting all the grain he will clean up in 20 to 30 minutes twice a day. The proportion of oats and corn when he is on full feed should be one part oats to ten parts corn and cob meal with alfalfa hay, or one part oats to seven parts corn with prairie hay.

Feeding Troubles

A calf sometimes goes "off feed" and stops eating grain. This may be due to the rapid rate you have increased the grain per day, to dirty feed or feed trough, left over feed that sours in the trough, quick changes in the kind or quality of grain, or some health condition in the calf himself. Try to determine the cause and do something about it immediately. Cut down the ration at least one half, and sometimes the full amount, and start over to build it back up as you did in the beginning. By all means, keep everything around the feed manger and trough clean. Do not expect the calf to clean up what is left over in the morning before he starts his evening meal. Clean the trough yourself and give him a fresh start with only a part of a feed of clean grain. Your father, the club leader, or in serious cases, your veterinarian may be able to help you.

Rate of Gain

You can expect your calf to grow and fatten at the rate of 1 1/2 to two pounds per day during the first three months and from two to 2 1/2 pounds per day during the next three to four months. Gain after that time slows down with the final finish.

Hot weather will affect the calf's appetite and reduce the rate of gain, so try to get the big gains while the weather is cool in the spring and early summer. Turning the calf out on pasture in the hot weather will not pay if you want to get a good finish on him. A little green grass after he has finished his grain, a taste of silage, or a little molasses sprinkled on his grain for an appetizer may help keep him on feed. Try any of these things cautiously; however, you may do more harm than good.

Training to Lead

You will "train your calf to lead" rather than break him to lead. The training begins when you get him home and in his shed and lot without making him afraid of you or angry at you. After he has settled down and is eating well, talk to him in a moderate voice that he can hear, walk toward him but do not chase him, and when he lets you get close enough reach out and scratch him around the hooks or tail, or let him reach part way to see what you smell like. Give him plenty of time to satisfy himself that you do not mean to hurt him. This may take several days, so be patient. Try scratching him with a comb or stiff brush while he eats or drinks. Never do anything in his stall that will make him think his stall is not the safest place in the world for him to be. If you have to treat him rough for any ailment or condition, do it outside his favorite spot, his home stall.

Several days after you can walk up to him and put your hands on him anywhere is plenty of time to think about putting a halter on him. In fact, some calves have been handled well until early summer and then trained to lead perfectly by fair time. In any case do not try to halter the calf until he is safely past the danger of having shipping fever.

Crowd your calf into a corner with a panel gate so he cannot move much, then slip a strong rope halter on him, adjusting it so the nose piece is half way between the eye and nostril and the lead is snug under his jaw. Tie him securely with about 18 inches of lead and so he can lie down if he wants to. Watch him but do not baby him. Brush him firmly, especially around the rump,
wants to go in his lot. Drive him more than you lead him, and do not try any tug of war game with him. Show him that he has some freedom even with a halter on his head. Never snub the end of the long rope to anything. He might race out to the end of it and throw himself so quickly that he would break his neck.

After a few trials in his lot, you might lead and drive him to a strange place. If someone could lead an old gentle cow ahead of him he might get the idea and go along very nicely. Be patient about all the crazy notions he may have about when and where to go and when to stand stubbornly in one spot. Never whip or beat him or yell at him or drag him with a tractor. If he wants to lag, have someone walk behind him a few more times as you train him. Pull firmly, then relax, then pull again instead of jerking and yanking at him.

Ask visitors to come to look at him, and after he is well trained, lead him out while strangers are around. Ask them to stand in one group rather than to spread out all around him. He thinks they are trying to pen him in when they circle him. When you are leading him in new places, he will notice little things and want to investigate. Give him time to look and listen and smell and to decide for himself that he is safe as long as you are there with him. If he jumps, speak to him and brace yourself to hold him. Put your hands and the lead rope down below your hips quickly and crouch down to get your weight close to the ground. If he does get you on the run, let him go rather than be dragged and hurt. While leading a calf, never tie or wrap the lead rope around your body or an arm or hand.

Fitting and Showing

In the usual 4-H beef club, the leader and some of the older members will help the beginners by giving demonstrations at meetings and by personal visits. You will learn much about fitting and showing from them, and you can study another manual, EC 0-23-2, about this topic. There is no substitute for experience in the show ring. No matter how long you show beeves, you will learn more each year, so do not expect to know it all by the end of this season.

Selling Your Beef

Selling your fat beef will be the natural end of the project. You can send him to the terminal market any time, or sell to a local buyer, or have him slaughtered for your home freezer. If you show him at one of the larger county fairs of the state, you may consign him to the 4-H beef auction at the close of the show. The same may be true at a district show. Auction sales have closed the state fair, Ak-Sar-Ben and similar shows for many years. At any beef auction after a show, the top few calves bring a premium and the rest go for about the current market price.

Since there are several choices, club members in the past have generally found a satisfactory outlet for their finished beeves. When the demand and prices are good, most members make some money; when the margin between buying and selling prices is narrow, only those who do the best job of buying and feeding have a profit; occasionally when the cattle market drops during the year most of the members lose money.

You can always learn, however, and some of the best lessons come the hard way. You can always enjoy 4-H club work with the other boys and girls and the fine parents and leaders you meet. It is an experience in growing up in Nebraska that you cannot afford to miss,