

Reporting Calving Ease Scores with “More Weight” Behind Them

In the last decade, breed associations have given breeders online tools to eliminate labor hours, phone calls, and file cabinets full of birth and weaning records. While the technology is convenient, it also allows breeders to make unwanted mistakes faster than ever before! It's time to register those spring calf crops; this article focuses on making sure your calving ease scores (and birth weights) are recorded properly AND with the intended effect on the Expected Progeny Differences (EPD) generated from your efforts. Most importantly, breeders must understand that a birth weight in pounds and a numeric Calving Ease (CE) Score are used to generate two EPDs expressed in **percentage of unassisted births!** Therefore, a positive Calving Ease Direct (CE, DIR) EPD indicates a higher percentage and less assistance. Confusing as it may seem, this EPD is the most useful “paper” tool in selecting a bull to mate to heifers.

The American Shorthorn Association (ASA) online system offers you 6 options for Calving Ease (CE) score. The following information tells you how to properly use each score and when each is most appropriate:

1 – Unobserved or Unassisted

Pretty self-explanatory, but the most desired of the scores.

2 – Easy Pull

The word “easy” should have never been used to describe calving ease. However, regardless of your size and stature, this score of “2” is reserved for any time you touch the feet, but do not use mechanical assistance. When calving heifers, this score is often referred to as the “I wanna go to bed pull.” By the same token, do not make excuses for your heifers or cows in this scenario. It's easy to say “she would've had it on her own...so I'll put down a score of 1,” but you inadvertently select for lazy cows that rely on you every year by doing so. Through my travels I have found that the older the breeder, the less tolerable he/she is of cows needing assistance. As a general rule, a heifer should give birth to at least 6% of her body weight without assistance, cows 7%. If you enter a CE score of 2 for any percentage lower than these, the cow would make great seasoned beef sticks, but a very poor Shorthorn breed matron!

3 – Hard Pull

If you hooked up the jack or used any sort of additional leverage to extract the calf, a score of 3 should be entered for calving ease. These birth scenarios often give us nightmares, but likewise are the most important to report properly. If the calf dies in the birthing process, it should still be weighed and recorded in addition to the calving ease score of “3” being entered. These unfortunate cases must be reported to ensure future disasters can be avoided by you and other breeders.

4 – Surgery

During the birthing process, surgery is only necessary for 2 reasons: the calf is too big or the calf is presented wrong (breech, butt first, etc.). A CE score of 4 should generally be used for calves that are too large to be delivered vaginally. Again, dead calves should be recorded and weighed in these scenarios. If you have to pay the vet bill, the sire and dam should at least suffer the consequences in their EPD profile!

5 – Malpresentation

First of all, it is important to know that a CE score of 5 does not influence EPDs. Some would say the harsh winter of 2010 caused more “5's” than they had ever seen before. If the environment is at fault, then the genetics (EPDs) should not suffer. Quite simply, this score should be used for any assisted birth where the calf does not come out front feet first with the head on top shortly thereafter. Breech, backwards, upside down, butt first, head back or down

are all examples of this CE score of 5. However, there are instances when interpretation is necessary by the breeder. For example, if the calf is breech but weighs 125 pounds and the 2-year old dam weighs 1250lbs., the proper CE score is 3 or 4, but not 5. The “EPD story” from this scenario should be that the calf was too big, not an environmental mishap that made the hind feet come first. Likewise, if a 65 pound calf comes butt first and you were able to pull it with your bare hands, the proper CE score is 5, not 2 or 3. The sire and dam’s EPDs should not be “punished” for the circumstance.

6 – Stillborn

Though I wish this was not an option for online users however, it has an appropriate use. Do not enter every dead calf on the farm as an automatic 6. This score should only be used for late-term abortions or, God forbid, lethal genetic defects. Any calves that perish from a prolonged birth should be scored as 1-5, particularly those that are too large to pass the birth canal.

The end result is a more real reflection of the genetics before you...and your customers.

Calving Ease, Direct EPD (CE, DIR) – predicts the ability of a bull to calve unassisted when mated to first-calf heifers, expressed in percentage of unassisted births.

Calving Ease Maternal, Daughters (MCE or CEM, DTRS) – predicts the ability of a bull’s daughters to calve unassisted, expressed in percentage of unassisted births. This EPD is also an indicator of pelvic area and shape.