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Are you sow-challenged?

“What has happened to the sows?”

“Where have they all gone?”

I am frequently asked these questions as I talk to breeders and commercial producers alike. Now, I am not talking about the declining number of breeding females in the United States.

The better question might be, “Does anyone select for sows anymore?”

This concern was evident the other day when I searched for sow photos in the NSR picture files. In recent years, breeders and advertisers have sent in very few sow photos for advertisements, and I had to go quite a ways back in order to find any that suited me.

Is this merely a coincidence? Or is it an indication of where the focus has been in many of the breeding programs throughout the country?

The challenge is everywhere. Before you think that I am on a soapbox for the commercial breeders and that I’m admonishing those on the showpig side, I want you to understand that I believe much of the swine industry has been “sow-challenged.”

Many commercial farms today face double-digit mortality rates, replacement rates nearing and often exceeding 50 percent and average parity at removal from the herd well below four parities.

A multitude of reasons exist, including the quest for rapid genetic turnover through terminal breeding programs, the push for extreme leanness and a labor force that is not educated in basic stockmanship principles.

A change. An interesting phenomenon is occurring in today’s commercial herds.

Veterinarians are encouraging many of their clients to take more control of their breeding herds and produce replacement females in-house.

The caution: to successfully accomplish this, you cannot use the existing terminal-type genetics in place today. Rather, selection should be placed on documented long-term productivity, feet and leg soundness and body conformation.

The show-ring side has faced challenges similar to those found in the commercial sector.

I often hear that gilts are delayed in cycling, sows do not return to estrus in a timely manner and lactation performance is sub-par.

Taking its toll. It appears that the quest for making a market hog or showpig look the way it does has had serious consequences on sow performance. In addition, the primary selection for the next generation has been on sires and their look.

To complicate this further, many are selected at younger ages, before given a chance to prove themselves. In many cases, they’re disposed of before true breeding merit is established.

I recall talking to many of the wise and weathered breeders (no offense to the young breeders) about a sire only being as good as his mother.

By selecting sire after sire based on how they look, with little or no regard for the dam, it is no wonder the industry asks the question, “Where are the sows?”

The good news! We do have breeders and programs that have not lost sight of the power of the sow.

To those breeders I say, “Thank you for staying the course.” I also challenge you to step forward and feature your programs to fellow breeders and the commercial industry.

To those that have found themselves, by design or fate, on the short end of sow productivity, you have an opportunity to improve your herds with some of the best genetics in the world.

Our industry is loaded with tools to help in selecting the animals that can work for you.

EPDs for reproductive traits are extremely valuable in identifying and confirming a breeding program that focuses on sow productivity. Use them to your advantage, no matter if your emphasis is showpigs, breeding stock or commercial sows.

Finally, if I can provide assistance in locating genetics or working one-on-one with you to make the improvements you deem necessary, don’t hesitate to give me a call at the NSR office.

You don’t have to go through life being “sow-challenged!” **SE**

commercial connection

Rebuilding America's sowherd

A well-designed sow herd can manufacture pigs like a machine.

>> Mark Meurer

Can John Deere produce a mean, green tractor with neglected, run-down manufacturing machines?

Can Dodge stamp out a dually pickup truck with a broken, half-maintained assembly line?

Can any manufacturing plant operate at peak efficiency without highly tuned, well-managed equipment?

No.

Sows are to pork producers what machines are to factories. Without sows that produce pigs, wean heavy litters, breed back consistently and stay in the herd for several parities, no swine operation can operate at maximum efficiency.

Simply stated, a sound, well-designed, professionally managed sow herd can and will manufacture pigs like a machine.

During the past several months, a renewed interest in the condition of the nation's sow herd has emerged.

Could this peaked interest be the result of elevated replacement rates, high culling percentages and unacceptable death rates?

Have we finally come to a point where sows are being considered an asset, not a liability?

Probably.

Time to evaluate. Chuck Olsen, a purebred breeder and showpig producer from South Dakota, says that all segments of the sow herd – commercial or showpig – must be reevaluated for performance.

“The showpig industry needs to think of the sow

herd as a long-term commitment, not a short-term fix,” he says.

“Long-term” means breeding sows that are basic, fundamental and balanced.”

Olsen says he believes that

showpig-type sows must continually be bred with more than one generation in mind.

“The drive to produce a champion barrow or a \$100,000 boar has made many producers forget about the need for females,” Olsen says.

“Showpig sows still need to possess longevity and productivity,” he continues. “Breeding females for the extremes is short-term thinking.

“Extremes like excessive muscle are quick fixes based on single-trait selection, not overall balance.”

With years of experience in the purebred industry, Olsen understands that the commercial side of the swine business and the showpig industry should not be that far apart when it comes to breeding sows.

“The drive to produce a champion barrow or a \$100,000 boar has made many people forget about the need for females.”

>> Chuck Olsen

“Whether you are breeding for market hogs or showpigs, sows need to be balanced,” he says. “If sows are designed correctly, they will have longevity, durability and versatility.

“My philosophy is that I cull sows when I say it is time, not when the sow decides for me,” he explains. “That is the definition of a sow herd packed with longevity and durability.”

A balancing act. Creating females with balance requires keeping the sows in proportion, Olsen says. The right width, depth and length equal balance.

“It is all about structural correctness, skeletal angles and heaviness of structure,” he explains.

“When you blend all these traits together, you get a sow herd that is effectively in balance.”

Olsen agrees that now is the time to scrutinize the sow herd, even in the showpig industry. With many showpig breeders frustrated and disgusted with



Chuck Olsen believes in the value of the sow herd.

the reproductive inefficiencies of showpig-type sows, the industry is already reassessing the need for more sow durability, volume and practicality.

"The practice of breeding hogs starts with the sow herd," Olsen says.

"Every great boar has a superior mother, grandmother and great grandmother. Producers must understand that building a sow herd takes patience.

"It is a long-term, lifetime project, not a six-month endeavor,"

he continues. "Sows are the foundation to all successful breeding programs."

Everett Forkner, a purebred breeder and owner of *TRULINE*[™] Genetics, a



Everett Forkner says the sow herd is the backbone of the industry.

commercial seedstock operation in Missouri, agrees.

Forkner concurs that the sow herd is the backbone of the swine business.

He says every great herd boar that has improved the swine industry was the result of an outstanding sow line.

Emphasizing the commercial value of his sow herd, Forkner says that he has bred sow lines on his southwest Missouri farm keeping two main philosophies in mind.

Know the best. First, Forkner believes that all genetic improvement starts with knowing the top 10 percent of any given sow herd.

"Our goal is to improve our breeds by creating superior herd boars," he says. "To achieve this, we evaluate our sows based on the economic traits of feed intake, milk production, and the inherent growth associated with converting milk into pounds.

"We also make it a practice to select sows that are robust and resilient in their phenotype," he continues. "Sows that are easy-keepers tend to have higher feed intakes and keep better body condition.

"These sows are the cornerstone of our breeding program," Forkner adds.

Maternal selection. The second philosophy Forkner applies: selecting breeding boars based on maternal traits.

"We first evaluate all boars based on maternal-line rankings," he explains. "We do not care if the boar is a York, Landrace, Hamp or Duroc.

"To improve the sow herd and make the breeds better, we feel that maternal traits are the most

influential in making hogs more productive and economical," Forkner says.

With philosophies engrained, Forkner has set out to improve his commercial seedstock business by focusing on parent-line and grandparent-line females that make his customers economically viable.

Forkner says his ideal commercial females are those that have productivity, longevity and uniformity.

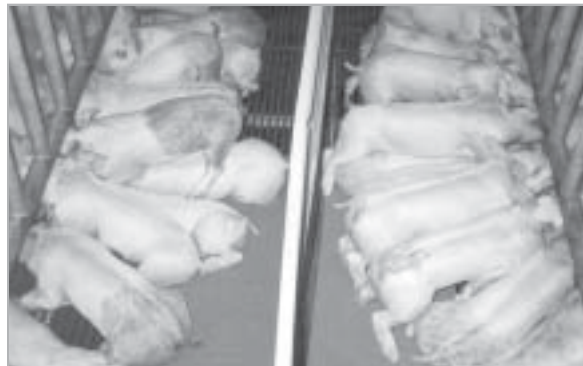
He also desires a commercial sow that has salvage value once she is mature.

"Producers need to view cull sows as a money-makers, not money-losers," he insists.

In terms of productivity, Forkner hopes his customers will benefit from sows that consistently produce 11-12 pigs born alive, wean 10-11 pigs, wean 160-pound litters in 21 days and rebreed within five and a half or six days.

To achieve these goals, he demands sows that have high feed intakes to better minimize weight loss during lactation.

Testifying to his commitment in developing productive sow lines, Forkner recently compiled data from three customers' 1,260 sows. Of those three customers, Pig Champ data revealed that they achieved 11 born alive, 10 weaned, 148-pound 21-day weaning weights, 13-pound pig averages in 18 days and 91 percent of sows bred back by seven days.



Forkner says that all genetic improvement in litters on a swine operation begins with knowing the top 10 percent of any given sow herd.

A new direction. "This is where the industry is heading," Forkner explains. "Sows that are productive and designed with flexibility of skeleton, soundness and livability will thrive. We are starting to move away from sows that are single-trait selected to a sow herd that combines longevity, correctness and productivity."

While sows are not literally gear-and-pulley machines, they certainly are physical machines capable of producing pigs in factory-like comparison.

Whether producing commercial- or showpig-type offspring, the reevaluation of the nation's sow herd is in full swing.

With a focus on balance, correctness, productivity, durability and longevity, the future of the modern sow is taking shape. **SE**

STAGES Sire Summary to be published April 16

The Trait Leader list is compiled every three months, and is updated on the STAGES Web site and published every six months.

The April summary will be distributed at the World Pork Expo, and it will be mailed to those who request it.

The deadline for submitting maternal and growth performance records is Friday, April 16, for your sires to be included in the Trait Leader list.

To reserve your free copy of the latest release, call the NSR office or check the National Swine Registry Web site at www.nationalswine.com.

Just click on "Commercial Industry Services," and then on the STAGES link.

Herd health update

PRRS information available

Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome (PRRS) virus continues to challenge swine producers across country and around the world.

To help producers understand the virus and present the most up-to-date information, the National Pork Board compiled a producer version of the 2003 PRRS Compendium.

This provides an overview of the many aspects of the PRRS virus, including clinical signs, epidemiology, interaction with other diseases and control strategies.

One chapter in the Compendium is entitled "A Producer's Guide to Managing PRRS Virus Infection: What Do You Need to Know?"

This informative guide can serve as a framework as you work with your own veterinarian to develop a plan to control the disease.

Copies of this helpful book can be obtained by contacting the National Pork Board at 1-800-456-PORK.

PRRS Web site available

The National Pork Board has a new Web site to deal with PRRS issues as part of its National PRRS Initiative.

The site is for pork producers, academia, biopharmaceutical companies, genetic suppliers, swine veterinarians, government animal health officials and pork production companies.

Content will be updated as more PRRS information becomes available.

You can access the site at www.porkboard.org/prrs/default.asp.

Marketing database on its way

NSR continues to see its role in pork production as evolving.

Most producers are familiar with the NSR pedigree and promotional efforts. Now, more and more inquiries are being made to the NSR office from breeders seeking assistance in marketing and product development.

For instance, NSR staff fields calls from breeders looking for marketing opportunities for purebred-based animals outside of the breeding-stock and show-prospect markets.

In addition, meat companies have contacted the NSR office numerous times for sources of pigs that fit their specifications.

Some inquiries have focused on the production of quality-verified pork, while other people have requested certain types of pigs, such as roasters, antibiotic-free hogs and non-confinement swine.

These new markets may not be for everyone, and they may require you to adapt your management practices or breeding strategies.

But working together, we can potentially provide opportunities for sustaining, and perhaps growing, your swine business.

In order for NSR to better service these inquiries and meet the needs of our members, we are establishing a contact database that can serve as a resource to help facilitate business development.

Make the call. If you would like to be included, please contact Rick Pfortmiller at the NSR office at (765) 463-3594 or drop an e-mail at rick@nationalswine.com.

Extra, Extra