

# ~~7~~ 10 Things Every Cattle Breeder Should Know

By David Nikodym

I am writing this article with an eye on some things I feel you should know or consider when getting started with cattle (hopefully Texas longhorns). It isn't all inclusive and isn't meant to replace a good mentor. I feel knowledge is the key that unlocks success and a little knowledge doesn't always turn that lock. So let's get started.

**1) Decide what your goal is.** I always encourage people to do their own research. Visit ranches, see what other ranchers are doing. Of course this article is going to be a little "longhorn centric", but even within this breed there are many paths., specifically, beef or commercial, show stock, miniatures or horn stock. The mission statement for our ranch goes like this, "create colorful cattle that are conformationally and functionally sound, and that are competitive at the Longhorn World Championship and the Horn Showcase Championship. Continue to use industry leading genetics to create valued product in the market place". We have been arguably successful at the Longhorn World Championship and Horn Showcase Championship, which are horn measurement competitions, but we also enjoy showing cattle, and that is where the conformationally and functionally sound part kicks in. For us creating value in the market place means more horn. For people that choose to produce beef with the longhorn cattle breed, there are numerous programs that are very successful in that area. Longhorn beef is very good and very good for you (low in fat/low in bad cholesterol). The longhorn show circuit isn't like many other breed circuits. Some of our closest friends have come from showing longhorns and it is a very supportive environment with a focus on children. I encourage you to do your research/homework with your checkbook in a safe place. When you think you are ready to buy after your homework is done, find reputable breeder and start small. While on the subject of small, there are several breeders who enjoy miniature longhorns and that just might be what works for you! It is, after all, about you and what you like and the direction you want to go. Buy the best cattle you can afford, better is better than more!

**2) Animal care.** The time to find a large animal veterinarian (who has the equipment for longhorns) isn't when you need one. Finding a vet should be near the top of your "to-do-list". Trying to get



a large horned animal down the run and into a normal chute at the "normal" vet office isn't going to work.

*This is what 105 inches of total horn looks like and it isn't going into a standard cattle chute.*

Please trust me on this one, "been there done that". This takes me to some more basics. An option to the above is to have adequate cattle handling equipment. There are numerous quality longhorn squeeze chutes out in the market place, and they are well worth the investment. Again, the time to get one, or at least have access to one, isn't when you or your visiting vet need one. There are many chutes on the market that can meet your needs. Many of those will tell you how great the chute they are selling is. So as with cattle, please do your own homework, with checkbook in a safe place. Used chutes are also out there, but buyer beware, make sure it meets your needs. Animal care also means having a catch pen to gather your animals in. A stock trailer should also be on your short list, or at least access to one that will meet your needs. Like the squeeze chute mentioned above, there are used, less expensive options available just about everywhere (Craig's list). One of the best ways to care for your animals is with a preventative medicine approach. Discuss vaccine requirements with your new found vet. Vaccine requirements will vary depending on your location. If you haven't already, you will hear the term "OCV". It stands for "Official Calfhood Vaccination". There are those that will tell you it isn't required. It is identifiable by a small medal tag in the ear, and a tattoo on the inside of a fuzzy ear that you probably won't be able to read. Look for it and ask about it when buying heifers or cows. (Bulls and steers don't get OCV'd, but should get a slightly different round of shots, without the eartag.) This must be done for heifers before age ten months. The specific protocol says between four and ten months. Most just have it done at weaning time and are done with it. It is true that some states don't require it, but for you to market your product to buyers in a state that does require breeding animals to be OCV'd it is a requirement. Twelve times out of ten it is a requirement!

**3) Pasture safety.** Specifically - net wrapped round bales. I hate to even say this, but I will to make a point. If you are running a black cow (Angus) operation and that steer (product) is only going to be around for twenty-ish months, the cumulative result of ingesting plastic net wrapping from "round bales" may not be fatal. In the longhorn world many animals produce well into their teens and beyond. You see the potential problem? I have also seen where some of the plastic gets wrapped around the





tongue of an animal causing it to slowly die because the tongue can't operate as designed. If you are using round bales to feed, please, please, please make sure that you cut off and collect all net wrapping or twine before animals have access to the bale. Sometimes not easy, but please consider it a requirement. While on the subject of plastic ingesting, calves seem to be fascinated with plastic bags, nothing catches blowing plastic bags nearly as well as barbed wire. Calves may not survive their first encounter with a plastic bag. If you happen to live down wind of a Walmart parking lot you will probably see the danger. Try to make a habit of walking your fence lines from time to time. My back pockets are always full of garbage I find in the pastures. Sorry, don't mean to be "preachy" but...!

**4) Minerals and Salt.** Let's talk about salt. You can purchase and use the generic white or red salt blocks, and it is better than no salt. When it comes to minerals, I think you should ask your bovine veterinarian what they recommend. Some people swear by this or that product, but it can be very regionally specific. What works best in the high arid parts of Wyoming or Colorado may not be what is best in your region. A good vet or longhorn mentor should have some good ideas for you. The presentation of salt and minerals to your animals is also important. Loose minerals, once wet, will lock up/harden to a cement like texture. This isn't palatable and once wet the actual "minerals" will leach out. We use a product for containing salt and minerals; orange, 3 feet across, 3 sections, large black rubber cover, that does a fine job. Again, several quality products out there. Salt, minerals, water, air need to be available 24/7/365.

**5) Weed control and pasture management.** Again very important and again very regional. Let me start by saying that my pastures don't look the best (at all) this year (disclaimer), please do as I say and not as I have done this year. Many feed shops that sell bulk fertilizer also have spreaders available for use, it helps fertilizer sale. They can be towed behind a tractor or a heavy duty truck (I don't recommend using a Jeep). Let us do some fertilizer math, let's say it costs you \$600 to fertilize 40 acres. That same \$600 could buy you 15 round bales at \$40 per bale. This is where most go wrong and the initial/annual fertilizer cost seems much worse if you lease instead of own the property. Fertilizer is a solid investment, let me try to explain. That \$600 investment will grow you more grass and your pasture will last longer, into the fall, every time. That will most likely make up the difference of those 15 round bales. The return only gets better when hay prices go up from \$40 each. There are best and bad times to apply a standard 10-20-10 fertilizer. Ideally, the first drops of a rain are hitting your windshield as you start spreading. The water mixes with the fertilizer and is better absorbed. Spraying for weeds, most states require the person doing the spraying to have some type of certification. So, in most cases, this is a job best hired out. The different sprays are again a regional decision. Most of my fertilizer math applies to spraying for weeds also. Bottom line, it is money well spent. There are countless articles and publications out there about rotational grazing and pasture utilization. I highly recommend you find some ideas that you like and see if you can make them work for what you are trying to do.

**6) Cattle Feed.** Yep, again very regional. I have heard a saying that I very much subscribe to, it goes something like; "you can't starve your way to a profit". A good feed program will go a long way to maximize an animal's genetic potential. In the longhorn world that maximization can mean bigger horns, it can mean more hanging weight, it can mean the fattest show cow. But some basics; there is a system called "Body Condition Scoring", not going to make you an expert on the subject. The scoring chart goes from 1-emaciated to 9-very fat, with the ideal range being 6-good to 7-very good.

The body condition scoring of an animal will vary throughout the year. Of particular note, or concern, is the score of a young first calf animal. For the sake of the young mother you may want to consider weaning her calf early if her condition deteriorates to rapidly. A good parasite control program goes hand in hand with a good feed program. Other things to consider, we use "Liquid Feed" in our pastures throughout the winter to help keep condition on our animals along with hay (roughage). Body condition is much easier (and better) to maintain than it is to re-gain.

**7) Marketing 101.** If you haven't considered a marketing strategy, I feel safe to say that you are behind the power curve (or 8-ball). Theoretically your herd will increase 60% per year, there of course are variations on that percentage (yearling heifers, steer calves, etc...). I feel it is important to have at least thought about who you want to market to long before you "have to sell". Again, with some regional variations, longhorn cattle don't do well at the local sale barn. They tend to be valued fractionally when compared to a big black cow in this arena. The highest price, that I am aware, paid for a registered Texas Longhorn at public auction was \$170,000. She is a genetic gold mine with huge horns. Sold "across the scales" she probably wouldn't bring \$1,000. Extreme example, but used to make the point that you need a marketing strategy. Oh, did I mention that better is better than more. Again writing this article from a registered Texas Longhorn perspective, this goes back to item 1 of this article. Research and determine a herd that makes you happy. We market our animals, which are complete animals with a focus on horn, several ways. Every year we decide which registered Texas Longhorn auctions we want to consign our product to. We usually will consign to 3-5 auctions per year. We also market our animals through our website for "private treaty" to other longhorn enthusiasts. Lastly we market our bull/steer calf crop to individuals that raise them into a meat program. This is fairly standard, with variations of course. Some of our less desirable momma cows are used as recipient cows in our embryo program. Again just a variation on a marketing strategy. Two things I want to emphasize; first, start with the best animals (in your path) that you can afford. A great animal eats about as much as a marginal animal. Second, use the best bull that you can. This can be through Artificial Insemination (AI) or through purchase of an exceptional bull. Your bull will be half of each calf crop. Doesn't it make sense to use the best sire you can afford, to create a valued product in the market? Probably not a super insightful paragraph, but some things for a new breeder to consider. Thanks for sticking with me, a bit longer article than I meant for it to be. Hopefully this article means everything to someone, or at least something to everyone. Enjoy your Texas Longhorns!

*About the author: David (Nik) Nikodym is certified by FEMA as a Professional Continuity Practitioner (PCP). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Texas Longhorn Breeders Association of America (TLBAA). He and his family raise Registered Texas Longhorns in central Oklahoma. His paying job is as a Commander in the U.S. Navy where he has significant experience working at USNORTHCOM and with FEMA to plan for National Special Security Events and national level disaster preparedness. Additionally, he has taught numerous courses for USNORTHCOM throughout America on how the military would plug in to assist during a time of disaster; Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA). For more information about his longhorn program visit: [www.commandersplacelonghorns.com](http://www.commandersplacelonghorns.com)*

*Photos by Kim Nikodym*