

GOOD RESULTS ON THE DINING TABLE BEGIN WITH GOOD DISCIPLINES ON FARM

The most important piece of farm equipment for Gloucestershire beef rearer and farming entrepreneur Paul Westaway is a set of weigh scales and home-made 25-metre cattle race.¹ "Rearing cattle is a high risk business and our position as a 2006 start up is that we must minimise all predictable risks," he says. One such risk in the production of 270kg dead-weight Angus-cross heifers for Blade Farming is an unexpected standstill in growth rates.

"We need them to average 1kg/day weight gain throughout their 15 months here," he explains. "If they stand still without us knowing for only a month part-way through, their growth rate has to be 17% higher in the final six months to reach target weight on time. High feed prices would make this a loss-maker, and regular weighing helps us make sure it doesn't happen."

Two of the three biggest threats to animal performance identified by Paul Westaway, pneumonia and scours, were dealt with in weeks one and two of this series. To address these, he allows Blade Farming's high health calf rearing operation to shoulder the burden, buying weaned calves from them at three months of age when they have already received vaccine protection against pneumonia.

The third major threat arises from a combination of gastrointestinal worms and, perhaps surprisingly on a farm with light soil types and only 64cm (25") average annual rainfall, liver fluke. "Until two years ago, we'd never seen fluke here," Paul explains. "Then we had a group that took about a month longer than target to finish. Abattoir feedback identified fluke as the problem, so we asked our vet's advice about preventing this in the future."

Against worms during the early to mid-grazing season, Mr Westaway employs a strategic programme using a wormer from the ML class on all Angus-cross finishers. Then up to five weeks before housing, they are treated with a moxidectin-triclabendazole combination, trade name CYDECTIN® TriclaMox, for worms and fluke.

Summer and winter alike, calves are weighed strictly at monthly intervals. Progress is plotted on a growth chart against a clear target to reach 520-530kg live-weight by 18 months of age, including one six-month grazing season as a condition of the Blade Farming contract.

By starting at a young age with sympathetic handling through a well-designed system, Paul Westaway says the weighing operation puts minimal stress on cattle and handlers alike, and reckons going to such trouble pays a significant health and performance dividend.

"If a health problem due to parasites for example is allowed to develop, we've seen how apparently healthy animals can take up to a month longer than planned to reach target weight. Feed and bedding costs alone for those extra days could be in the region of £30 to £50 per head on most farms."²

In addition to minimising production costs, a very precise target for finished weight is required by Blade Farming to supply very high value striploin, fillet and ribeye cuts to customers in the big-city A-list restaurant sector. With the Angus breed kept by Paul and other Blade finishers, these are the right size commercially for restaurants from a 270kg dead-weight carcass with a highly desirable marbled fat component.



Paul Westaway with the most important item of equipment at Gamage Hall Farm.

1 Paul Westaway, 19 October 2012. Personal communication. Gamage Hall Farm, GL18 2AE.
2 7.5kg/head/day concentrate @ £200/tonne, plus straw costs.

Slaughter at only 18 months of age also ensures a very tender texture to the meat, while the predominantly forage diet ensures the grass-fed flavour and fragrance that is favoured over grain-fed by many discerning British diners.

Alongside their beef finishing enterprise, Paul Westaway and wife Kirsty also run a farm-to-dining table online retail business to supply premium steaks and rib-roasts direct to consumers. In a blind tasting staged by Eblex of premium quality sirloin steaks from Scotland, Ireland, USA, Australia, Botswana/Namibia, Uruguay/Argentina/Brazil and a Wagyu unit, the English Angus-cross beef reared by the Westaways and others on the Blade Farming system was voted the best by a panel of professional samplers and consumers.³



The Westaways' beef retailing enterprise offers easy-carving rib roasts and premium steaks, all Angus of course.

3 Hugh Judd, 2 January 2013. E-mail report to Paul Westaway. Eblex.