

No Need to Be Boxed in: Group Pens and Grain for Veal Calves

Michael S. Mosner

Background

My family has been in the wholesale veal business for 30 years. The basis of this business has been various breeds of female beef calves that are slaughtered at less than 500 lb. These calves are allowed to suck from cows and graze until

they are ready for market. Beef calves, however, tend to vary in quality and quantity depending on the time of the year that they are purchased and raised. Generally, calves become scarce in the spring, when feeders are buying calves to put out on pasture. Then, in the summer and

Michael S. Mosner, M & G Farms, Inc., P.O. Box 38, RD #3, Route 17M, Middletown, NY 10940.

fall, large numbers of calves usually become available, thereby depressing prices. Again, in the winter, calves become scarcer and consequently more expensive.

In the early 70's, there was a chronic shortage of calves. However, feed was cheap (interest rates were, too), and feedlot operators were snatching up everything that moved for beef. As a result, my father, David Mosner, had some difficulty procuring calves for veal production. At that time, Dr. Gardner of Brigham Young University was experimenting with the use of a grain diet for calves raised for veal. He concluded that there was no difference in taste or tenderness between grain-fed and milk-fed veal. After learning about Gardner's work, my father suggested that I do some work on grain-fed calves while I was attending Cornell University. Dr. R.G. Warner of Cornell agreed to sponsor and supervise me in an independent research project on the economical feasibility of grain-supplemented rations for veal calves. I concluded from these initial studies that grain-fed veal could be raised economically. The only remaining hitch was to find a means to end up with a calf carcass pale enough to satisfy the current preferences of consumers.

However, after the huge grain sale to Russia in 1974, the cost of feed skyrocketed. Indeed, a worldwide food shortage ensued. As a result, feed costs became exorbitantly high, and feedlot operators stopped looking for calves. This slack in demand caused a decrease in the price of calves, and the necessity of feeding grain to calves for veal production was greatly diminished.

Upon graduation from Cornell, I started raising milk-fed calves. Throughout the first 3 years, as a prime veal feeder, I continually experimented with different grain rations for calves. During most of 1980 and 1981, the price for finished milk-fed calves was quite low. Many growers were forced out of busi-

ness. Also, skim milk and whey prices rose, thereby placing extra economic pressures on the grower. And the finished price for prime veal fluctuated by as much as 86 cents per lb; there was no stability in the market. Then, in 1981, I began to raise only grain-fed calves, in order to circumvent the constraints of the traditional marketing channels.

Current Operation

At present, there are three types of veal. These include the beef-type calves (discussed above), baby "bob" calves, which are slaughtered immediately after birth, and milk-fed calves. The production costs entailed in raising prime veal are particularly high. The sophisticated systems necessary for strict climate control and expensive automatic feeding machines place the price of milk-fed veal beyond the reach of most consumers. In contrast, bob calves are relatively inexpensive, but they provide a poor meat-to-bone ratio to the packer and therefore represent poor utilization of livestock. As mentioned before, beef breeds tend to vary considerably in both quality and quantity throughout the year. Thus, grain-fed veal appeared to be a viable option for making consistently high-quality veal available to consumers at a reasonable price. Also, packers would be pleased because of the favorable meat yields attainable from grain-fed veal.

In our operation, calves are raised in group pens rather than in individual stalls. This allows the calves room to move around and to "socialize." This practice eliminates much of the stress put on the calves in crate systems. Further, because there is some iron content in the grain, the calves do not become as anemic as milk-fed calves. Anemia is a well-recognized stressor to calves, and a reduction in stress means that disease is less likely to develop. In addition, grain-fed veal provides better nutrition to the

consumer, because of the additional iron in the meat. This decrease in anemia is accomplished while the low levels of fat and cholesterol for which veal is noted are retained. In essence, grain-fed veal constitutes a highly desirable commodity, since it can be produced inexpensively, is a high-quality product, and is affordable to the average consumer.

We are currently operating in a converted free-stall dairy barn. We have capacity for about 600 calves. (However, additional stock can also be penned outdoors.) We buy calves that have an initial weight between 150 and 175 lb for grain-feeding. However, sometimes economics may dictate that we buy baby calves—in this case, milk replacer is offered until weaning, which occurs at 6 weeks of age. Calves are housed inside the barn and sorted into pens in groups of 20. Each pen is 12 by 32 feet, thereby allowing each calf about 20 square feet. Calves are finished at 450-500 lb, live weight, and this increase in weight requires about 4 to 5 months. Straw and old hay are used as bedding. When older calves first come into the barn, they are given an initial check for general health and an injection of vitamins. The calves are offered hay and a commercial calf starter. After 3 weeks, the calves are switched to the finishing ration, which consists basically of corn, with a protein supplement and essential vitamins and minerals. Baby calves, after weaning, are switched from milk to calf starter and ad lib water; after they have consumed about 100 lb of starter, they are switched to the finishing ration.

In the beginning, we used baby Holsteins in our operation. However, we have found that it is also economic to use other breeds, such as Hereford, Angus, and Charolais (purchased at 200-300 lb, live weight).

A salient advantage of this system is that labor costs per animal are substantially lower than with conventional

milk replacer systems. Since the calves are not individually penned and food is consumed as needed, one man can take care of several times more calves. However, without individual pens, it is not as easy to assess how much a particular calf consumes or to discern illness. For these reasons, skilled management is a critical factor in this program, as in all group pen operations. Another advantage of the grain-fed program is that there are usually a wide variety of grain suppliers to choose from, in contrast to the small number of milk replacer sources.

My finished calves have been graded as choice veal and are distinguished by a light pink hue and excellent conformation. The major problem we have faced so far arises from the myth perpetuated by some feed companies—that veal must be white to be of premium quality. Consumers have been repeatedly told that "If it's not white, it's not veal." I believe that this is an obvious fallacy that must be countered by effective educational efforts.

The Future of the Veal Industry

Over the last decade, the per capita consumption of veal has steadily declined. Perhaps the most important reason for this decline has been the high price of veal and the resulting substitution of other meats. Consumers are now buying more of the reasonably priced products, such as poultry and pork. Chicken, turkey, and pork cutlets are currently being featured in many supermarkets and restaurants. Not only are these meats less expensive than veal, but they taste good, too. In my opinion, unless the veal grower can find ways to cut the costs entailed in production, he will simply price himself out of business. I believe that grain-fed veal is the best economic alternative to all other types of veal, for many reasons. Grain-fed calves offer the consistent high quality that the beef breeds do

M.S. Mosner

Comment

not, the meat-to-bone yields that bob calves lack, and the relatively low price makes the product a nutritional and affordable choice for the consumer.
