

Cattle Marketing and Airport Travel

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Travel is a fairly regular occurrence when working as a state specialist for the University of Tennessee Extension. The majority of the travel is windshield time which provides the opportunity to evaluate forage and crop conditions as well as see cattle along the way. However, some of the travel requires airtime which is an opportunity to observe people in the airport and on the plane.

As I sat in the airport in Nashville in the middle of July, it occurred to me how air travel is very similar to the cattle marketing process. This may seem like a stretch at first, but there seem to be some striking similarities.

First, let me begin with my travel. I rolled out of bed at 3 am and hopped in the truck 30 minutes later. I drove to the airport with little to no congestion on the roadways, but the same cannot be said for the busy ticket counter lines and the TSA checkpoint at Nashville International. At the checkpoint, I took off my boots, emptied my pockets, and pulled off my belt. I did these things not because I had to, but rather because I wanted to walk in my sock feet with saggy britches to the full body scanner where a couple of folks would tell me, "You're good!" At which point they misspoke, because I was good about three minutes earlier when I still had my boots on and my pants were still being held around my waste by a leather belt. (Some people have different definitions of "good.") Anyway, I proceeded to my departure gate and watched people come and go prior to boarding my plane.

As I sat watching, it occurred to me that everyone else at the airport had a journey that morning as well and it was like cattlemen hauling calves to the sale barn to be marketed. We gather calves at home and then run them on a trailer. We haul the cattle 30 to 50 miles and then drop them off at the sale barn where someone says, "You're good!" right after they close the trailer gate and we pull out of the way. (No cattleman is good until he or she has a check in hand that reads a very large dollar amount!)

Back at the airport, there were people of all ages, colors, shapes and sizes. There were older people who moved slowly and some had noticeable physical ailments. There were young people who ran around like calves just let out of the pen and babies who cried. There were young and middle aged adults dressed in business suits. There were white people, black people, yellow people, and red people. There were short petite ladies and tall bigger boned ladies. There were athletic looking men and those looking a little less athletic. There were some thin people and there were some that were fleshy! In short, there was one of every kind in the airport that morning.

Many times, a person could attend a sale barn and they will see animals of all ages, colors, frame size, muscling, and flesh. There could be anything from newborn calves to yearlings while other pens may have cull cows and bulls. The young animals may be sold as heifers, steers or bulls. These sale barns usually have more black cattle than anything else, but a person can also find white, red, yellow, and grey cattle. Some of the cattle will even have a white face to go with a different color hide. Some of the cattle will be small framed while others are medium or large framed. There will also be cattle that are thinly muscled while others will have average to heavy muscling.

In the airport once again, I noticed some people were very relaxed as if they were conditioned for the travel ahead of them while anxiety and stress was visible on others. Still others tried to hide their worries. It was not long before I saw people coughing, wiping noses, and rubbing red eyes. These same characteristics are evident at cattle markets. Freshly weaned calves are generally highly stressed and more susceptible to sickness while weaned and vaccinated cattle appear rather thrifty.

There are several other comparisons that could be made, but some are not meant to be in print. What is the point of all of this? The point is that several characteristics and conditions impact cattle prices. Health, physical condition, muscling, frame size, flesh score, weight class, and a whole host of other characteristics play into the prices paid and received. The market is well defined in relation to

what is valued which should guide producers in production practices and breeding programs. There are many physical characteristics that cannot be changed in the short-term due to the genetic base and resource limitations. However, producers can focus on practices that will reduce stress to animals and risk to buyers such as vaccination and preconditioning programs while at the same time evaluating marketing characteristics that will return higher values. In conclusion, most producers should avoid their cattle marketing looking like an airport. Diversity is good in many aspects of life, but most cattle producers should produce as uniform cattle as possible and prepare them for the next production stage.