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President's Message

by Steve Andras, RAAA President

For Whom the Bell Tolls...

We're all familiar with this book title from Ernest Hemingway. Though my article has nothing to do with classic literature, I thought the title was a proper segue into the following anecdote, and to my broad-er observation that follows:

Just up the road is a field, with two horses in it. From a distance, each looks like every other horse. But if you stop your car, or are walking by, you will notice something quite amazing. Looking into the eyes of one horse will disclose that he is blind. His owner has chosen not to have him put down, but has made a good home for him. This alone is amazing.

If nearby and listening, you will hear the sound of a bell. Looking around for the source of the sound, you will see that it comes from the smaller horse in the field. Attached to her halter is a small bell. It lets her blind friend know where she is, so he can follow her.

As you stand and watch these two friends, you will see how she is always checking on him, and that he will listen for her bell and then slowly walk to where she is, trusting that she will not lead him astray. When she returns to the shelter of the barn each evening, she stops occasionally and looks back, making sure her friend isn't too far behind to hear the bell.

True or not, this charming horse story provides a clear example to us in the beef industry.

As seedstock producers, we often assume the role of the sighted horse, and ring our bell to draw the commercial cattleman our direction. However, what is striking to me in the above illustration is that often, both seedstock producers and commercial cattlemen together, play the blind horse. If we pause to listen, we won't just hear a bell, but numerous bells--often coming from opposite directions. We've chosen the wrong bell too often and followed it too far, ending up in the ditch.

With the 2007 bull sale season largely in

the books and the breeding choices for 2008 set in stone, have we chosen the correct bell to follow? Did we select that which is (or will be) popular, instead of what is ideal for our environment / management practices? Do we often replace those genetics in our breeding program most needed by our commercial clientele with a particular phenotype or genotype that is more alluring to him? Do we fear that by producing what we know is ideal for our environment, we will be shunned by those (commercial cattlemen) upon whom we depend for our livelihood? Is it possible that we place self-preservation and survival over breed/industry improvement? By blindly following a particular bell (i.e., suggestions of semen companies, universities, fads, etc.), do we find ourselves off the beaten path?

Chip Ramsey of Rex Ranch, NE, offered a poignant insight at the BIF Conference: "bulls don't need to be that fat to breed cows, but try to sell one that isn't." I found this comment relevant and I really appreciate his candor. This serves as a prime example of the paradox that exists between two parties in the beef production chain. I'm not talking about seedstock producers and commercial producers, rather, I'm addressing the thoughts of the seedstock producer and the deeds of the seedstock producer. Whether we admit it or not, we are often torn between what we should produce and what we can sell.

In summary, I'll utilize another relevant quote from the BIF conference. Steve Radakovich (Radakovich Cattle Company) of Earlham, IA said the following: "The one big injustice of the seedstock industry is evaluating and supplying over-managed, over-fed, fossil fuel dependent bulls to cow-calf producers who are forced to survive on solar energy and low-cost production. The future of beef production will be determined by the ruminants' ability to adapt to limited solar-produced forages." ■