

# **Beyond Numbers: Structure, Standards, and Stewardship of the Dexter Breed in the United States**

## **A Path Forward**

by

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**SILVER MAPLE  
DEXTERS**



**2000–2025**

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No breed of cattle evokes the charm and resilience of the Dexter; small in frame but rich in history, the Dexter has long been cherished by homesteaders, smallholders, and breed enthusiasts. In the past three decades, the United States has seen a significant rise in registered Dexter cattle and the number of people breeding and owning them. The breed has moved from "threatened" status on The Livestock Conservancy's watchlist to full recovery by the mid-2000s. This achievement represents tremendous success. But this success should not represent the zenith of the breed's progression. It represents a point at which new challenges must be addressed and old ways examined and tossed aside if not conducive to the breed's future. In this paper, a structural issue behind the growth in numbers is examined that now threatens and has the potential, if not corrected, to do even more significant damage to the viability and identity of the breed.<sup>1</sup>

Today, the Dexter breed has an inverted breed structure that is not conducive to the breed's long-term identity, continuity, and development. In inverted breed structures, selection intensity, casual, laissez-faire breeding approaches, and breeding to standards are often diluted, seedstock is undervalued, and the breed's genetics and direction are adrift in a marketplace dominated by short-term ownership, social media-driven 'knowledge,' and turnaround sales.

Some may suggest that the Dexter breed's recent growth in numbers alone negates any concern about breed structure and that market dynamics will organically maintain breed health. However, as demonstrated historically across livestock breeds, numbers alone rarely preserve the genetic integrity of breeds, and the market is littered with breeds that are changed beyond recognition, if not outright ruined. Without intentional stewardship, the Dexter breed risks drifting into genetic mediocrity and losing the traits and identity that define the breed. The failure to correct the inverted breed pyramid will ultimately dilute the genetic value, compromise the unique functionality, and undermine the decades of careful breeding and conservation efforts that saved Dexters from the dustbin of history.

### **Understanding Breed Structure: Pyramid Inversion**

As Dr. Phil Sponenburg outlines in *Managing Breeds for a Secure Future* (Sponenburg, Bixby, & Beranger, 2017), healthy breed structures resemble a pyramid with a broad base of production-oriented animals that supports a smaller tier of production-focused breeders, which in turn supports a smaller nucleus of breeders focused on breed type and genetic direction. In this structure, each tier plays a distinct and vital role.

Dexters, by contrast, have flipped this model. No authentic commercial production base comprises the majority ownership of Dexters, as is typical in a robust breed structure. The result is a Dexter community where nearly every owner, regardless of purpose in owning, experience, capacity, or goals, produces offspring that contribute animals back into the registry. The graphic below shows a robust breed structure compared to an inverted structure. The actual breed structure of the Dexter breed is provided in an image later in the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> The structural discontinuity within the Dexter breed, which this paper addresses, has been noted by SMD as a concern for many years, predating our presentation on the topic at the 2017 ADCA Region 6 Meeting in Emporia, Kansas.

Ironically, the Dexter's inverted breed structure was key to the breed's survival when numbers were very low and in danger of extinction. In 1952, when there were 38 Dexter breeders in the United States,<sup>2</sup> every animal was necessary for the preservation of the breed genetics, and every one of those 38 with a bull and a cow was needed to increase the registered stock and expand the gene pool. Dexters, as a breed, have moved well beyond that need, but unfortunately, the breed's structure has not.



### The Owner - Breeder Distinction

A healthy breed values owners and breeders but does not presume they are always one and the same. Owners that use the breed in production (beef and dairy) or other capacities (hobbyist, pet market, preservationist, tax shelter, etc.) are vital to the breed's success. The breed cannot move beyond its current structure and deficits without a strong and substantial production-owner tier. Dexter owners should not be discouraged by this critique of the breed's status. Instead, this is an invitation, a challenge, to step into the role of a breeder with intention and purpose. To start where many do, but do not stop there. The breed needs more people with Dexters at every tier of the breed pyramid but with roles that suit their desires, purpose, and capacity. Specifically, the breed requires a distribution of people with Dexters that more closely aligns with the robust livestock breeding structure compared with where the breed is now.

A foundational distinction: an owner possesses cattle, but a breeder shapes generations. An owner may value a Dexter for turnaround potential, utility, aesthetics, or other reasons. A breeder looks beyond the individual and considers the influence of an animal on their herd over time, examining all aspects: phenotype, genotype, and production.

Ownership is a starting point, but deliberate stewardship defines a breeder, a distinction often overlooked. New entrants frequently breed early, often, and exit the breed before witnessing the outcomes of their own making. This short-term cycle contributes to the erosion of genetic consistency and integrity, obscuring at best—and often working at cross-purposes to—the efforts of breeders who invest in structured improvement. As Dr. Don Bixby (2004) notes, "Uncontrolled breeding is nearly as dangerous as no breeding at all."

In their seminal work, Evolution and Selection of Quantitative Traits, 2018, Bruce Walsh and Michael Lynch emphasize the importance of breeders acting within a healthy breed structure and

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<sup>2</sup> American Dexter Cattle Association, ADCA History, [https://dextercattle.org/adca-history/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://dextercattle.org/adca-history/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

intentionally steering the gene pool in desired directions through selective breeding. Without this role, "a population drifts, sometimes into extinction, more often into mediocrity. Breeders must act as filters and multipliers, intentionally steering the gene pool in desired directions through selective breeding." <sup>3</sup>

To be a breeder is to master a craft, not to wear a title. The difference lies in purpose, capacity, approach, and methods:

- Owners may select animals based on personal preference or convenience. Breeders intentionally select with informed, thoughtful, and well-developed plans guided by data, phenotype, genotype, standards, and the potential generational impact.
- Owners often breed opportunistically or casually. Breeders do so strategically and with discipline to a plan developed over time and reflecting a significant timeline.
- Owners keep minimal records. Breeders maintain detailed records on performance, conformation, and breed traits, using this data to refine breeding plans and inform future selections.
- Owners typically think in terms of years or breeding seasons. Breeders think in terms of generations.

The breeder's craft is marked by discernment, patience, and the discipline to select with purpose rather than sentiment. It requires the courage to say "no" far more often than "yes," a willingness to cull what doesn't serve the vision, and a deep respect for the slow, generational work of shaping a herd that stands as evidence of intention, not accident. The financial commitment and patience required to adopt this view and approach can challenge the hardest capacity and dedication.

Becoming a breeder involves viewing each animal through the lens of the future herd. Beginners often hold onto subpar breeders for too long, which delays progress. As breeders mature, they transition from seeing each animal as unique, irreplaceable, and the culmination to perceiving the herd and breed as more important than any individual. Understanding the distinction between an owner and a breeder in breeds like Dexters is more than semantics; it is crucial for the breed's viability.

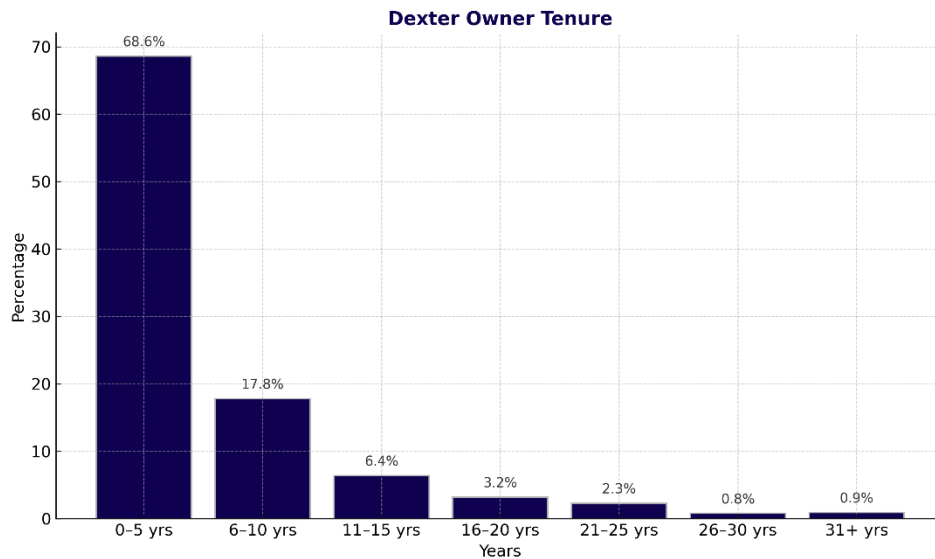
Being successful at livestock breeding is not just a matter of turning on a switch by buying a bull and a cow and putting them together; it's an endeavor, a journey. To succeed in the craft, those who pursue it must be persistent, tenacious in purpose, and possess the wherewithal to withstand psychological and financial disappointments and setbacks. New owners aspiring to be breeders must adjust their expectations accordingly. An eager new Dexter owner with a goal of becoming a nucleus seed stock breeder might envision producing a line of excellent type cattle in just a couple of years and completely recoup their initial investment, but not factor that each generation takes time to prove itself and oftentimes doesn't. With cattle gestation length and time before breeding age, meaningful herd improvements can take 5, 10 years, and longer. This reality runs counter to historical trends in Dexter breed ownership. There are no quick returns on investment in the breeder's world, and no amount of enthusiasm will alter that fact. In more colloquial language: "You can't bull a cow in the morning and expect veal in the evening."

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<sup>3</sup> Walsh, B., & Lynch, M. (2018)

Breeders of any length of time in the effort experience setbacks that require patience and perseverance: a carefully planned calf may be lost to illness, a promising heifer may not breed successfully, or a mating may not produce hoped-for improvement. Perseverance is a learned skill here. Those transitioning successfully from casual owner to breeder develop resilience and generational perspective, weathering disappointments and staying focused on incremental progress. They also learn to celebrate small victories and manage expectations – a slightly better milk yield, a nicer udder on a daughter than her dam, a bull calf that grows a bit faster than his peers, a string of heifers showing a bit more breed type than their dams – as signs that the plan is working. This patience is frequently reinforced by mentors who remind newcomers that every top breeder of today began decades ago and persevered.

Dexter owners in the U.S., on average, remain in the breed for 4.5 years, 70% are in the breed for less than five years and 90% for less than 13 years. This has been the case for the last few decades and is not a new or a transitory phenomenon. Because of the nature of cattle gestation, the five-year mark delineates the beginning of multi-generational planning for a successful breeding program. In Dexters, it is most often the point of exit from the breed – just when a nascent breeding program should begin to take form, cattle are dispersed. A small percentage, 7.2%, of Dexter breeders have been in the breed for over 15 years.



Generation interval is defined as the average age of the sire and dam when their replacement offspring are born. In cattle, this interval varies based on several management factors that will make a breeding program more aggressive or conservative, e.g., at what age heifers are bred and the age of bulls used. In most management approaches, the range of a generation is about 3 years to 5 years. Each generation represents an opportunity to refine, correct, or compound decisions. Over time, the difference between two and five generations can determine whether a breeder merely maintains a herd—or meaningfully shapes a herd and breed.<sup>4</sup> Five generations of cattle breeding is about **15 years** in a vigorous management approach.

Management	Generational Interval	Generations in 15 Years
Standard/Vigorous	~3 years	5 generations
Moderate	~4 years	~3.5–4 generations
Conservative	~5 years	3 generations

Five generations or 15 years is the point at which it is reasonable to say that a breeder has had sufficient time to make significant changes to his herd and fix traits if a plan has been followed throughout, without significant "branching" and changing of focus. While a breeder can begin to influence phenotypic traits or address specific issues in 1–2 generations (e.g., a glaring structural fault or color), the accumulated effect of sustained selection, culling, and linebreeding or outcrossing typically requires multiple generations to:

- Fix desired traits within a line or herd (*not just express them in one animal*)
- Stabilize type or character, especially in small herds with limited breeding options.
- Avoid regression, which often occurs when first-generation gains are not reinforced.

### Genetic Leverage and Selection Pressure Across Generations

Heritability and selection intensity across generations shape a herd over time. A simplified form of the "breeder's equation" ( $\Delta G = h^2 \times S$ ) [see footnote 5] formalizes this principle, demonstrating that genetic progress depends directly on the heritability of a trait and the strength of the selection applied. High-heritability traits respond quickly; moderate ones require a longer arc of intentional breeding. The difference in impact from two to five generations of disciplined selection is significant. Meaningful, lasting genetic change with a breeder that has and is true to a plan can be achieved in 4 to 5 generations or 12 to 15 years.

In contrast, short-term breeding without planned and consistent selection pressure yields, at best, cosmetic changes, lacking the depth and permanence that proper generational breeding imparts. The heritability table below displays the estimated heritability of six trait domain areas and the degree to which the trait is affected through selection. The potential impact by generation chart shows how change can be affected by two generations (5 years) and five generations (15 years).

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<sup>4</sup> Decker, J. 2021

<sup>5</sup> Breeder's Equation  $\Delta G = h^2 \times S$

**$\Delta G$  – Genetic Gain** The expected improvement in the population's average genetic value for a trait after one generation of selection. This is the breeder's return on the selection effort.

**$h^2$  – Heritability:** The proportion of trait variation that is explained by genetics. A value between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating that selection will more effectively translate into genetic change.

**S – Selection Differential without considering standard deviation of the trait:** The difference between the average value of selected parents and the population mean. It reflects how aggressively superior animals are chosen.

**In practice:** A highly heritable trait (e.g.,  $h^2 = 0.5$ ) under strong selection intensity ( $S = 1$ ) yields  $\Delta G = 0.5$  units per generation. Multiply that over five generations, and the breeder begins to reshape the herd.

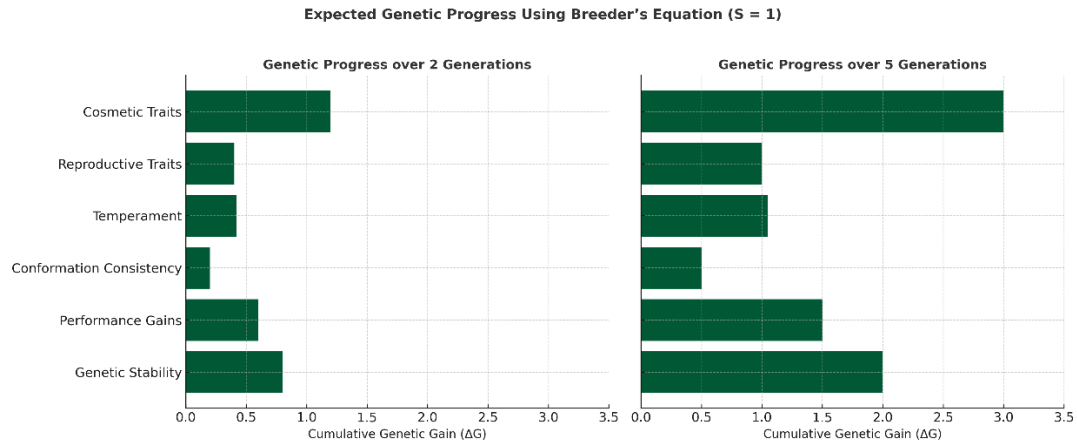
### Heritability Estimates of Selected Cattle Trait Domains

Trait	Estimated heritability ( $h^2$ )	Interpretation	Citation
Cosmetic Traits	~0.60	Highly heritable; quick response to selection	Bourdon, 2000
Reproductive Traits	~.20	Low to moderate heritability; responds over generations	Valente, et. al, 2017
Temperament	0.21 – 0.39	Low to moderate; influenced by both genetics and environment	Alvarenga,A.B. et al., 2022
Conformation Consistency	.10 - .47	Low to moderate; responsive to selection, especially over multiple generations	Xu, et. al., 2022
Performance Gains	.30 - 0.50	Moderate to high; strong genetic progress possible, especially over multiple generations	Freetly, et al., 2020
Genetic Stability	~0.45	Moderate; managed via selection and inbreeding control over generations	De Rezende Neve, HH et al., 2018

### Potential to Positively Impact General Traits Areas Over Generations

Trait	1–2 Generations Impact	4–5 Generations Impact (15 years)
Cosmetic Traits	Rapid changes are achievable through selection (e.g., coat color, horn status).	Traits can be firmly established and consistently expressed across the herd.
Individual Improvement	Noticeable enhancements in specific animals; limited herd-wide consistency.	Uniform improvement across the herd with consistent selection practices.
Temperament Shifts	Initial changes are observable; stabilization requires more generations.	Stable and predictable temperament traits across the herd.
Conformation Consistency	Minor improvements; significant consistency requires extended selection.	Marked uniformity in physical traits and structural soundness.
Performance Gains	Incremental improvements in traits like milk yield or growth rates.	Substantial and measurable enhancements in performance metrics.
Breed Character Fixation	Early efforts may not yield immediate consistency.	Distinct and recognizable breed characteristics are firmly established.
Genetic Stability	Vulnerable to variability and regression.	High genetic stability with reduced risk of undesirable traits resurfacing.

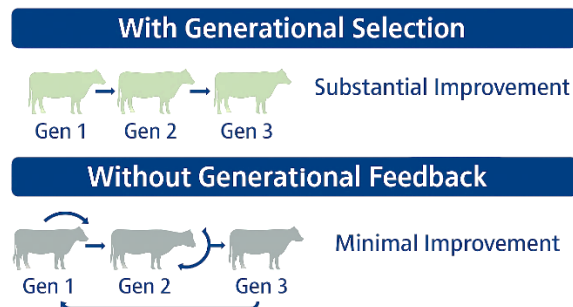
The charts below illustrate the relative differences in cumulative genetic gain that can be achieved between a 2-generation and a 5-generation breeder, given a hypothetical selection intensity of 1.



The hypothetical used to create these charts does not factor in that casual breeding, which is a low selection intensity breeding, e.g.,  $S < 1$ , is often the norm for those with Dexters exiting the breed at 5 years.

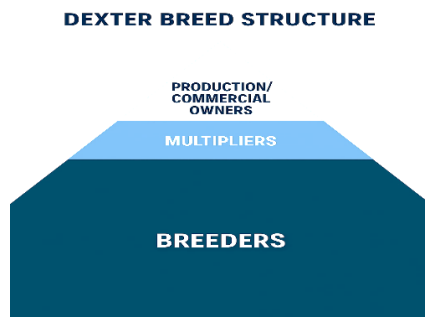
The revolving door of short-term participation in the Dexter breed, with an average duration of fewer than 5 years and just 7% of breeders lasting 15 years or more, is not conducive to developing stable, multi-generational, purpose-driven, high-selection intensity breeding. Seventy percent of Dexter owners never see a single generation of their breeding mature, reproduce, or reveal the impact of their breeding decisions. Many new Dexter owners are purchasing stock from those with less than 5 years of ownership, who have had zero generational breeding. They are starting their herds over again from "scratch" with zero generations of planned breeding.

### Generational Improvement in Breeding



Seventy percent are out of the breed within 5 years and sell their stock to another new breeder, which has zero consistent generational breeding to the second order, and so on. The merry-go-round of zero generational breeding results in a herdbook populated largely by stock that has never reached two generations within a single breeding program. The 'breeders' are no longer involved in the breed to modify their approach or be held accountable for the consequences of their selection and breeding choices. The current Dexter breed structure looks more like the image below than the inverted pyramid or the ideal structure.





No generational breeding feedback mechanism witnesses or responds to the consequences of a substantial amount of stock in the registry. The stock sold from zero generational owners as breeding stock perpetuates a never-ending cycle of casual breeding in the herdbook. It is beyond problematic to expect substantial, generational improvement nationally with such a breed dynamic in place.

*"About five or six years in, I thought I had it figured out, now, 10 years later, I realize how much I didn't know then. My aha moment was when I realized it's not just about this year but what you're building three breeding cycles out from now. That kind of understanding comes from seeing what you are producing down the line." Dexter Breeder, Year 17*

### The Role of Breed Associations

For a breed to survive and thrive, it depends not only on individual breeders but also on the organizations entrusted to lead the breed. Breed associations are not just registrars of animals; they are or should be, the stewards of breed standards, promoting improvement and ensuring continuity. Forgoing this stewardship at the altar of membership growth is counter to the long-term interest and integrity of the breed.<sup>6</sup>

As Sponenburg warns, "When associations prioritize growth over guardianship, they create the conditions for drift, disorder, and eventually decay."<sup>7</sup> The risk to the breed is amplified when associations are bypassed entirely, as is increasingly the case among new and older Dexter breeders choosing to primarily source their information about the breed from uncurated social media forums.

### *Comparative Breeds: Mechanisms to Improve Breed Structure*

Several breeds demonstrate that robust breed structures can be developed and maintained in small population breeds. Small number breeds with more functional breed frameworks feature:

- Breed Standards in place, enforced, and efforts that reward merit over market trends

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<sup>6</sup> SMD's recent blog post on breed standards expands on this issue, particularly regarding the approach of breed associations to enforcement and guidance. See: "Thoughts on Breed Standards (and the Absence of) in the ADCA," Silver Maple Dexters Blog 2024. <https://www.silvermapledexters.com/post/thoughts-on-breed-standards-and-the-absence-of-in-the-adca>

<sup>7</sup> Sponenburg, Bixby, & Beranger, 2017

- Nucleus breeders that focus on fixing genotypes, breed type, and production are identified as such
- Mentor systems and educational gatekeeping programs developed and expected
- Performance data, breed evaluation tools, product marketing

The American Aberdeen (formerly Lowline) breed utilizes performance recording and herd classification to inform breeder decisions, thereby preserving critical traits such as calving ease, maternal quality, and feed efficiency. The breed markets products as breed-labeled, e.g., "Aberdeen Premium Beef." The breed has developed the American Aberdeen Association Excellence Program, recognizing superior animals and breeders who raise them with Dam of Merit and Sire of Merit designations<sup>8</sup>.

The Red Poll breed maintains genetic integrity by consistently aligning its breeding practices with clearly defined dual-purpose standards, emphasizing practical productivity and conformation over transient market trends. This approach includes production data recording, analysis, and comprehensive herd reporting.

Other examples include Belted Galloways and British Whites—both with modest population sizes yet strong, well-defined breed identities upheld by active registries and performance-oriented breeder networks.

Interestingly, the Dexter breed offers a successful example in the United Kingdom through the work of the UK Dexter Cattle Society. The UK Dexter Cattle Society operates with a clear commitment to breed stewardship. They do so by maintaining enforceable breed standards<sup>9</sup>, offering conformation-based linear classification, placing responsibility on breeders as stewards<sup>10</sup>, and publishing an annual herd book that identifies evaluated through its classification program. High-scoring cows and bulls are recognized with photographs and rankings, emphasizing the importance of excellence over volume or trend. This institutional structure supports a breed standard requirement and a multi-generational breeder base, encourages accountability through data, and celebrates conformation and type as shared benchmarks, not optional preferences. The difference in emphasis: standards versus scale has led to very different trajectories in how the breed is preserved and advanced on either side of the Atlantic.

The Scottish Highlands offers a cautionary example and appear to be fellow travelers with the Dexters, also facing inversion risks due to an influx of casual ownership and aesthetic and boutique-driven breeding, pressures similar to those the Dexter cattle today encounter. The

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<sup>8</sup> American Aberdeen Association (2025, April 5). *Aberdeen Excellence Program*. Aberdeen Excellence Program. Retrieved April 5, 2025

<sup>9</sup> "Members must abide by the Breed Standard. A formal contract is signed (either hard copy or online) when they birth notify or register any animal. If in doubt, the owner should contact the Society Office" <https://www.dextercattle.co.uk/the-society/society-registration-procedures/>

<sup>10</sup> "Transfer of ownership: The vendor (seller) is responsible for transferring the animals to the new owner and for paying the transfer fee. The certificate will be then be re-issued with the new owner's details. Offspring cannot be registered by the new owner unless the transfer has taken place. If you are selling an animal in calf, please make sure you give the purchaser a bull service certificate so they have details of the sire

similarity of the information provided by the multiple Highland breed associations, yes, multiple breed associations<sup>11</sup>, and the issues they addressed are very similar to those in the Dexter breed.

These few examples underscore that Dexters need not reinvent the wheel; successful practices from these breeds—like well-developed mentoring programs, robust breed standards, excellence programs, and data collection can be developed and used in our breed.

## Market Distortions

Market forces are fantastic and powerful mechanisms of human experience. The creation of wealth and product knows no greater champion than that of the invisible hand of the free enterprise market. However, left to the whim of the marketplace, Dexters would have long ago vanished from the face of the earth. Thankfully, they did not because people acted with wisdom and intention, refusing to place the breeding and ownership of the Dexter breed at the mercy of the commercial market. Livestock breeds are much more akin to the living organisms of which they are composed than they are to a brand of automobile or your favorite beverage. Therefore, breeds must be stewarded by and preserved to a standard that is much different from the marketplace trends, even if a majority of the stock in the breed is bought and sold in that same marketplace. Once a breed is lost, you cannot easily return to the factory and manufacture its replacement or the next best thing. For breeds to survive, they must have a core breeding stock that stands above the free-for-all and vagaries of the day-to-day, year-to-year, and decade-to-decade whims of the market and perseveres. The core survives only through adherence to breed standards—not the shifting winds of the marketplace. As it does, the market will soon come roaring back, and the breed will remain steadfast as the pendulum swings to the "next best thing."<sup>12</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Sounds familiar. That the Dexter breed in the US has two registry associations is an absolute travesty apart from breed structure deficiencies.

<sup>12</sup> Study the most popular cattle breeds today and the difficulties they have and continue to encounter as they gyrate to the movement of the market. Here is but one example: Angus (North America) *Popularity and Use*: Globally renowned beef breed prized historically for carcass quality, moderate frame size, efficiency, and ease of finishing on grass. Popularity soared in North America and Britain during the mid-to-late 20th century, becoming one of the most recognized beef breeds. *Cause of Decline in Genetic Integrity*: Rapid breed expansion and market-driven selection for larger frame size, greater carcass weights, and faster growth rates. Significant loss of original breed standards, including traits such as efficiency on pasture, moderate size, maternal abilities, and breed-specific temperament. Lack of stewardship and structured selection allowed deviations from historic breed types and led to breed fragmentation and genetic inconsistency. *Outcome and Lessons*: Breed associations subsequently recognized these problems and have implemented structured programs to restore the historically beneficial traits, emphasizing the importance of maintaining genetic integrity and a coherent breed identity.

Dexters now have an inverted breed structure and are at high risk of being caught up in the full flush of market chasing and market inversions, further contributing to the inverted breed pyramid. Breeder-owners with weak or no breed standards and no significant commercial or production market spin like the weathervane in Nebraska, breeding to every zephyr that comes along to harmonize with the market.

In today's Dexter market as an example, a cow with years of selective breeding behind her from a generational breeder, of superior phenotype, and production records may sell for less or most often not find any additional value in the Dexter market than an unproven, uninspected "starter cow" bred for "nothing in particular" or, at most, current market and or novelty characteristics from a breeder in three years and now having a "herd reduction." This distortion arises from a market disconnected from breed structure, where buyers lack the necessary context or experience to differentiate between high-quality seedstock and casual owner-bred or commercial stock and no sufficient production/commercial outlet for cull stock. Consequently, breeders and owners reproduce for the next likely sale rather than adhering to breed standards.

*Three years in the breed, six calves on the ground, and suddenly it's a 'herd reduction – we're changing focus - moving on'. That's not a herd reduction. That's a hobby winding down. But those calves still end up registered, and no one seems to care what they are, or what they will produce. But someone, 'Got A Good Deal'" Dexter Breeder, Year 12*

What is lost through breed genetic drift is not quickly regained. Once type, purpose, and identity are diluted in the herdbook; rebuilding takes generations—if it can be done at all. Course correction is about present improvement and safeguarding the breed's future viability. Absent discipline to a breed standard, the marketplace will define the breed. The market does not assure anything will be defined by its best traits or certainly the ideal, only by the most easily marketed sales. This leads to a herd book filled with animals bred for no particular lasting quality and at the whim of the marketplace.

### **Information Without Stewardship**

In today's Dexter cattle community, social media has become a primary source of breed information for many seeking mentorship and guidance. While platforms provide broad accessibility, they are most often uncurated, and the advice offered is frequently shaped more by anecdotes and affirmations than by experience and expertise. Social media platforms, lacking formal authority and curation, promote repetition over rigor, sentiment over standards, and stridency over substance.

The impact of social media is a significant aggravating risk for a breed already struggling with breeder development. In the social media sphere, where decisions are made by popularity or convenience, flawed breeding practices are advocated and promoted, where they persist and then become normalized. Selection is justified not by breeding plans or objectives but by what is convenient, endorsed ("thumbed up"), and echoed online.

Historically, livestock breeding developed within systems of mentorship. New breeders learned under the guidance of established herds, gaining experience in conformation assessment, recordkeeping, culling, and goal-oriented planning. Mentorship still occurs within our breed, but overall, the mentorship approach and its associated mechanisms have largely atrophied in the breed today. Fewer and fewer new breeders are formally mentored; many enter the breed without any background in livestock breeding and are not offered nor have access to authoritative support or accurate resource availability.

*"Nobody pointed me to a breed standard, guide, or whatever it's called. I didn't even know there was such a thing until after we had two year's calves on the ground. The guy I bought my cows from was getting out and didn't tell me anything. That seems like something a new person should get on day one, not stumble across on Facebook." Dexter Breeder, Year 4*

This absence is more than a missed opportunity; it is a structural vulnerability. Without accessible, accurate, breed-centered education and mentorship, new owners are often left to chart their course through trial and error. In that vacuum, social consensus or the loudest voices replace breed standards, a century of institutional experience, decades of breeder experience, and often basic knowledge and theory of livestock breeding. The breed begins to follow the logic of popularity rather than purpose. Social media consensus and "member-driven" mantras may be satisfying in the short term, but neither is conducive to the continuity of a cattle breed: "The camel is a horse designed by committee."

Providing information focusing on the breed will not occur by 'staying the course'; it will require intentionality. Developing intentional mentorship programs, enforceable breed standards, and practical educational tools are foundational and essential to maintaining the Dexter breed as a purpose-bred, genetically sound, coherent population.

### **A Path Forward**

The Dexter breed will not course correct based on cuteness and charm nor the rich enthusiasm and passion of the Dexter community. The breed's long-term viability depends on structural changes that restore a functional breed pyramid, establish and enforce standards, and foster intentional breeding over casual, market-driven, and trend-based reproduction. This analysis and what is proposed is not a means to exclude or limit participation; it is about clarifying roles, reinforcing best practices, and cultivating a culture of stewardship.

What follows is not a theoretical wish list but a practical framework. A framework as a call to action. These are concrete strategies and actionable steps to secure the Dexter breed's purposeful and sustainable future. These recommendations respond directly to the structural issue and accompanying breed drift and accountability gaps identified in this paper. They are practical rather than theoretical and are equally applicable to dedicated individual breeders, collaborative breeder groups, or organized breed associations. These strategies and actions must be grounded and executed within the universal context of breed standards, the craft of breeding, and the intentionality of stewardship.

## Strategic Objectives and Actions

### Establish clear, Enforceable Breed Standards

- Establish, Promote, and Educate on a Breed Standard
- Develop a photographic guide with annotated examples of correct and incorrect conformation.
- Standard training on breed standards, breed type, and character is required for show judges and evaluators. Maintain a list of trained and approved show judges and require association-sponsored shows to only use judges from the list.
- Introduce herdbook notations or registry flags for animals outside the breed standard.

### Develop and Foster Dexter Production Markets – Building the Production Base

- Identify and promote Dexter-specific meat and milk qualities in local and niche markets.
- Develop brand marketing (e.g., "Registered Dexter Beef," "Registered Dexter Milk") to differentiate products in the consumer space.
- Create a producer directory and network connecting breeders with processors, outlets, chefs, and consumers.
- Encourage regional breeder groups to organize carcass evaluations, bulk marketing efforts, or cooperative processing.
- Establish registry or association recognition for production herds with consistent output and documented performance.
- Organization developed and sponsored Dexter product events.

### Reinforce Behavioral Differences between Owners & Breeders

- Create a side-by-side comparison of "Owner vs. Breeder" guidelines, outlining behaviors, goals, and responsibilities of being a breeder.
- Develop breeder-specific training and tools on constructive livestock breeding, encompassing philosophy, theories, methods, recordkeeping, measurement, and analysis.
- Develop web-based training and discussions on selection planning and herd management.

### Celebrate and Promote Generational Breeders and Develop A Means to Identify

- Establish a "Generational Breeder" recognition or credential for herds that have been actively breeding with selection intensity to breed standards for 15 years or more.
- Use registry tagging or searchable filters to identify multi-generation programs.

### Reflect Breeding Intent and Herd Goals

- Add voluntary breeder profiles to registry listings, where members identify their herd goals.
- Voluntary owner/breeder categorize their herds, e.g., Seedstock, Multiplier, Production, Conservation-Based, Hobby/Novelty.

### **Support Performance Testing, Phenotype Evaluation**

- Implement a voluntary linear classification system, collect and analyze data, and provide annual reports to members of trends in the national herd and high-scoring individuals.
- Recognize member breeders participating in breed and performance improvement programs and data collection in the registry and publications.
- Develop a Dexter evaluation program and incentivize the reliable collection and submission of trait and production data, such as weaning weights, heights, milk yield, and carcass data.

### **Encourage associations to Steward the Breed Actively**

- Focus on associations that fulfill their mission statements, have established breed standards, and emphasize breed integrity.
- Offer new owners introductory courses on breed history, standards, and purpose.
- Formal efforts to monitor and address drift in type, character, or function using data from assessment, classification, and evaluation programs.

### **Engage Breeders Effectively with New Herd Owners and Producers in Mentorship**

- Create a public-facing "Featured Breeders" portal tied to educational outreach and breed standard advocacy.
- Support breeders by creating blog posts, videos, or presentations on their selection decisions and breeding philosophy.
- Pair newer breeders who seek mentors with long-tenured breeders who volunteer to mentor through a new breeder program.
- Develop or organize a group of experienced breeders as social media ambassadors with accurate messaging and a mentorship ethic.

### **Stewardship - Not Elitism**

It is a fact that most Dexter owners are new to cattle and livestock upon entering the breed. That fact is not a flaw but a feature of the breed's modern appeal. Dexter's size, temperament, and dual-purpose utility make it one of the most accessible breeds for homesteaders, smallholders, and first-time cattle keepers. This accessibility is a tribute to the breed and should be heralded. But if accessibility becomes the basis and reason for avoiding and eroding standards, abandoning structure, and resisting accountability, then the very trait that draws people to the breed will be the same, diminishing the breed's future.

The argument often heard, voiced quietly at first and then loudly when challenged, is: *"Discussions and calls for breed structure, standards, classification, herd evaluation, or data collection are elitist, promoted by pompous elitists trying to puff their herds or reputations at the expense of others. Newcomers should be free to do as they please without being made to feel 'less than' by talk of type, conformation, selection pressure, or herd improvement over time."*

While this argument may be emotionally resonant, the critique does, like a Hallmark voiceover, leave everyone weeping, but no one can recall what the hell was said – missing the mark entirely. The call for structure and stewardship is not about exclusion. It is about responsibility. It is not about pretense. It is about purpose. There is nothing elitist about promoting the proposition that cattle registered in a breed registry reflect the breed type, character, purpose, and standard. There is nothing exclusionary about suggesting that if a breed is to survive in recognizable form, it must have a structure that identifies casual reproduction from intentional improvement. Every long-time breeder began somewhere. What distinguishes a breeder is not status, but practice, not claims, but commitment, not how many cattle they've sold, but how carefully they choose which ones to keep.

If there is an exclusionary impulse in the Dexter breed today, it is from those who champion the casual entitlement that presumes to breed without knowledge or mentorship, to sell without accountability, and to exit without consequence, leaving the next owner to inherit problems never faced, decisions never visited, and a herdbook filling with animals bred to nothing in particular.

Dexters deserve better. And newcomers deserve more.

This paper does not offer a closed club. It extends an open invitation to excellence, a calling to the meaningful work of becoming a breeder. It affirms that new owners are vital to the breed's future if they step forward as owners and stewards. This is not about perfection. It is about persistence. It is not about gatekeeping. It is about guideposts. It is the price of stewardship. It is open to anyone with the desire to learn, the patience to endure, and the courage to do right by the breed. No one is barred from the path but by their unwillingness to walk it.

### **The Stewardship We Owe**

For the Dexter breed to endure and improve moving forward as a valuable and identifiable breed, a breed structure that allows for that to occur is required. Breeds are not preserved and enhanced by enthusiasm alone. They are maintained and improved by intent, discipline, continuity, and professionalism.

The Dexter breed's future will not be secured by its charm or its owner's passion but by the character and resolve of those who breed it forward. Proper stewardship is neither automatic nor assured—it must be continually chosen, practiced, and refined. As breeders, the best contribution we can make is a herdbook that reflects intention and meaningful progress for those who will carry forward the work.

A breed is not maintained and improved as an accident of popularity. It is a product of choice, direction, and the long labor of cultivating an environment of stewardship excellence. If the Dexter breed is to retain its identity, purpose, and promise, it will be because enough people chose not just to keep Dexters—but to breed them well, with purpose, and for future generations.

Jeff M. Chambers  
—Silver Maple Dexters



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