

## Feed Her or Fail Her

### Silver Maple Dexters

We are going to say this plainly, because the cows and calves do not benefit from nuance or silence.

There is a body condition problem that is too pervasive in our breed. It is not that cows are “too fat.” It is that far too many are calving in a body condition score (BCS) of 4 or less, and we ignore it at best and act as if it were normal, or worse, as if it were acceptable.



On the 1-to-9 body condition scale, 1 is emaciated and 9 is obese. A cow calving in a 5 or 6 is carrying enough reserve to cycle back, breed, milk, and raise a calf without being strip-mined down to hide and bone. A cow calving at 3 or 4 is already behind before the calf hits the ground.

From the reproductive side, the numbers are straightforward. To maintain a 365-day calving interval, a cow must be pregnant again by roughly 82 days after calving. Cows that calve in BCS 3–4 often struggle to even show first heat by 80 days. Cows that calve in BCS 5–6 tend to show heat closer to 55 days, giving them a real chance of staying on schedule.

Thin cows also short their calves. Cows at BCS 4 or less produce less colostrum; their calves are slower to rise and carry lower immunoglobulin levels. They start life behind in immunity and stay behind in gain. Lactation suffers, so weaning weights and muscle development suffer. That is not “thrifty.” It is compromised production and compromised welfare dressed up as frugality.

And let us be clear on welfare. Thin cows are not “hardy” or “naturally easy keepers who just run a little light.” Thin cows have compromised immune systems. Thin, undernourished cattle suffer. As breeders and stewards, we do not get to polish hardship into virtue and pretend it’s tradition. Asking an underfed cow to gestate, calve, milk, and rebreed on a budget of air and hope is not good practice, it is neglect.

What comes next of course is the shrug and the smirk and the: “*Well, you do you*”. That phrase is the last refuge of the unserious in cattle breeding. Cattle breeding is not a lifestyle choice to be “personalized.” It is animal husbandry governed by biology, and biology does not negotiate. If your cows are calving thin and you call it fine because “that’s just how Dexters are,” you are not practicing stewardship; you are rationalizing neglect.

Malnutrition also negates genetics. A pedigree, no matter how fine, cannot express its potential in a body that is starved. Underfed cattle do not transmit performance; they merely survive. Condition is not cosmetic; it is the foundation upon which every genetic advantage either stands or collapses.

And while we are at it, let us dispense with the “grass-fed” alibi. Grass-fed does not mean nutrient-deprived. It does not absolve anyone from providing sufficient energy and protein when the forage fails to meet the cow’s needs. “Grass-fed” is a marketing term, not a management plan. A cow cannot convert virtue signaling into calories. When the pasture is short, rough, or dormant, stewardship demands supplementation, not slogans.

Another harmful myth bandied about by “all-star contributors” is that feeding a cow well in her last trimester will make the calf “too big.” In reality, about 70% of fetal growth happens in the final 60 days, when nutrition drives colostrum quality, calf vigor, and the cow’s ability to rebreed. “That thought (don’t feed cow well in last trimester) will lead to a plethora of other issues that can extend through that calf’s entire productive life.” (*KSU – Balanced Nutrition Helps Minimize Calving Difficulty*).

Of course, over-conditioned cows exist, and yes, a true BCS 8–9 brings its own issues. But they are not the epidemic in this breed. Scroll the sale posts, the “look at my new cow and calf” photos, and reels on Facebook. What you will see, over and over, are cows that are simply too thin for the work asked of them and for their own welfare.

You can manage a fat cow down to a 6 with feed control. You cannot conjure flesh onto a cow that calved at a 3, is milking hard, expected to breed back on time, and raise a well-developed calf.

If you are breeding Dexters, you are breeding a working cow. Working cows require fuel. Grass is not a talisman, and hay is not a suggestion. If the forage quality is poor, you supplement. If the winter is hard, you adjust. If your cows are repeatedly calving in BCS 3–



4, the answer is not to recalibrate your eye and call that “ideal Dexter condition.” The answer is to recalibrate your management and feed.



[SMD cows 30–60 days pre-calving, correctly conditioned, deep through the barrel, full over the hooks, ribs visible but no sharpness. Ready to work, not overdone.]



[SMD cow 60 -90 days post-calving, a solid 6, working, cycling, raising calf ]

If your only comment to these photos is to sneer, “I don’t want show cows,” you’ve announced you don’t know what a sound, healthy, working animal looks like.

If you are not confident in your ability or you have never learned to body condition score cows, that is fine. It can be learned. Good stewardship requires the knowledge and ability to accurately understand what you're looking at. Below are resources on cattle nutrition and body condition scoring worth studying:

- Kansas State University - [Balanced Nutrition Helps Minimize Calving Difficulty](#)
- Merck Veterinary Manual [Nutrient Requirements of Beef Cattle](#)
- [NRC Nutrient Requirements of Beef Cattle \(2016, 8th ed.\)](#)
- University of Nebraska–Lincoln - [Body Condition Scoring Beef Cows](#)
- Silver Maple Dexters – [Cattle Body Condition Scoring](#) (2022)

If you want to argue that a BCS 4 cow or below at calving is “just fine,” move along. You are arguing with biology itself, the physiology of reproduction and lactation, and with the plain fact that thin cows and their calves pay the price for such choices.

We owe the breed better than that.

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*Silver Maple Dexters™ is a quarter-century registered herd and breeding program dedicated to evidence-based stewardship of the Dexter breed.*

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