Why Silver Maple Dexters Does Not Use Weaning Rings

Silver Maple Dexters does not use nose rings or anti-suckling devices at weaning. The decision is deliberate and grounded in the research and how we think about cows, udders, and the long view of breeding.

What research addresses
Some research suggests that two-stage weaning with nose flaps can reduce visible calf distress compared with abrupt separation. Haley, Bailey, and Stookey (2005) documented less bawling and fence walking and better short-term feed intake in calves fitted with flaps before separation. Price et al. (2003) reported similar behavioral benefits with staged contact systems. Loberg et al. (2008) likewise found that staged approaches produced calmer calves without meaningful improvement in average daily gain, suggesting that reductions in short-term stress do not necessarily translate into superior growth. These findings explain why many commercial operators adopt the devices when labor or facilities limit other options.

More recent work has raised additional concerns regarding commercial nose-flap devices themselves. Enriquez et al. (2022) reported that "without exception, all calves showed open wounds in the nasal septum, including those that lost the device before day five. Almost half of the calves showed weight loss during the period wearing the nose-flap devices." The authors concluded that this two-stage weaning method compromises physical integrity and should not be described as a low-stress weaning practice.

What research does not adequately address
The literature focuses almost entirely on calves. There are no long-term studies tracking udder health, teat-end condition, mastitis incidence, or productive life in cows repeatedly exposed to pronged rings. That gap matters for seedstock breeders whose primary asset is the cow herself.

Udder stewardship and biological caution
A weaning ring works by creating irritation on the teat ends and fore udder whenever a calf attempts to nurse. Veterinary medicine is clear that trauma or abrasion to the teat sphincter increases the opportunity for bacterial entry, the basic pathway for mastitis (Blowey & Edmondson, 2010). While rings have not been directly trialed for this outcome, the mechanism conflicts with every other principle used to protect udders.

Practitioner observations
Not published research, but field experience. Veterinarians in our region commonly note more post-weaning udder flare-ups and "hot quarters" during seasons when rings are heavily used. These impressions are anecdotal and

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unquantified, yet they come from people who treat the consequences rather than the theory. We consider that lived experience alongside the scientific record.

Physiological signal clarity in the cow is critical at weaning
Normal weaning with immediate physical separation allows the udder to involute[i] decisively once nursing attempts stop. With rings, the calf continues to stimulate the udder while not emptying it. Standard veterinary texts caution that uneven pressure and incomplete removal can contribute to edema and quarter soreness, particularly in heavier-milking cows (Radostits et al., 2007). The cumulative effect of repeating that pattern across years is unknown.

Behavioral habits
Some cows respond to rings by becoming defensive toward calves, learning to kick rather than simply step away. For a maternal, dual-purpose breed where calm handling is essential, rehearsing that behavior is counterproductive.

Our scale and management

Silver Maple Dexters is not a hundred-head range outfit. Calves are already grazing and eating hay before weaning day, and most take to the weaning ration on day one if they have not been exposed prior to weaning. Feed intake and separation-related stress are minimal because diet and water sources are familiar, and the transition is managed rather than abrupt.

We sort pairs calmly and move calves to good feed and familiar water. The process is brief, decisive, and requires no hardware. While separation is immediate and complete, we use fenceline weaning to allow visual and social contact without nursing access. This preserves a clear physiological off-signal for the cow while reducing unnecessary agitation in the calves.

We have all seen a calf work hard at a full udder. Putting prongs into that exchange is a trade we are unwilling to make. Short-term noise is a small price for a decade of sound udders, and convenience is not a sufficient reason to impose avoidable cost on the cow.

For these reasons, SMD weans with straightforward separation and attentive management. It is simpler, kinder to the udder, and consistent with how we manage cattle over the long term.

References

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[i] *An udder undergoing involution is a natural, two-step remodeling process occurring during the dry period. It involves the death of milk-producing epithelial cells (apoptosis), replacement by adipose tissue, and the cessation of milk production, allowing the udder to recover and prepare for the next lactation.*

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