Muscle scoring beef cattle

Bill McKiernan
Research Leader Animal Production, Production Research, Orange

Introduction
The muscle or red meat content of a beef animal is the most valuable part of the carcass. To help identify the red meat content in cattle, a method of evaluating shape termed ‘muscle scoring’ is used. Muscle score describes the shape of cattle independent of the influence of fatness. Muscling is the degree of thickness or convexity of an animal relative to its frame size, after adjustments have been made for subcutaneous fat.

Muscle scores are an accepted part of live animal appraisal in Australia. The National Livestock Language includes muscle score, as does the National Livestock Market Reporting Service. Research, both within Australia and overseas, has shown that when shape is assessed in this way it is an aid in predicting an animal’s worth. The degree of muscling affects dressing percentage and meat yield in a positive way indicating the greater value of the more heavily muscled animals.

Analysis of saleyard reports in NSW and Victoria has shown a clear price incentive for better muscled cattle and an even clearer price discount for poorer muscled cattle.

This publication describes the method of evaluating animals for muscling to encourage its adoption by the industry.

Evaluating muscling
Subjective and objective measures of muscling

Muscle scoring is a subjective skill which needs to be honed by continual practice and evaluation against an experienced assessor. Muscle scoring is cheap, easy and quick to obtain but the skill of the assessor is particularly important.

Butt Profile as used in the AUS-MEAT carcase language was developed as a simplified two dimensional assessment of shape. It is a different assessment of shape, being affected significantly by fat, and cannot be compared with live muscle score.

Eye muscle area, measured by a real time ultrasound scanning device on the live animal or directly measured on the carcase (equally accurate) is an objective measure of muscling. However, eye muscle area per se is not very useful as an indicator of animal or carcase muscularity because eye muscle area is highly correlated to the size of the animal – as an animal gets bigger its eye muscle area gets bigger. It becomes more useful when considered in proportion to the weight of an animal or carcase and hence becomes an estimate of meat content.

Eye muscle area is probably of more use for breeding purposes where it can be adequately adjusted (as in Breedplan EBVs). It is expensive and slow to measure on the live animal, relative to a visual appraisal of muscle score.

Muscle or fat
Muscling can be confused with fat if assessors are not trained in distinguishing the two. Muscle bulges and is round, fat wobbles, shrouds and flattens shape (smooths out). Muscle is round and curved and animals with a high degree of muscling when viewed from behind, are thicker through the stifle area than they are over the top. A fat, less muscular animal is widest over the top and tends to appear flat down the stifle muscle when viewed from behind (see Fig. 1).

Muscling and eye muscle area
Eye muscle area and shape (at the same weight) in cattle are related to muscle score. It is not a perfect relationship but it is reasonable to expect that as muscle score increases so too will eye muscle area, at the same animal weight.

Eye muscle area could increase due to an increase in size of the animal, but muscle score could stay...
Assessing muscle score

When determining muscle score one must first estimate the level of fatness covering the body. A pre-requisite of accurate muscle evaluation is the accurate appraisal of fatness. Once an animal’s fatness is known, allowance can be made visually and mentally to ensure that fatness does not hinder the evaluation of the animal’s shape.

Closely examining those areas of the body where fat is most visible or actually feeling those areas of the animal’s body, it is possible, with training and practice, to become extremely accurate in subjectively determining the level of subcutaneous fat.

The best places to assess muscling are those areas least influenced by fat, i.e. the hindquarter, the round and the top line.

Indicators of muscling in order of importance are:
- thickness and roundness of the hindquarter,
- stifles thick and width in the twist,
- width across the back and loin.

Forearm thickness and leg stance are useful only when differences in muscularity are large. When forearm circumference can be measured then it is the best measurement indicator of muscle score.

Observe cattle from behind to assess thickness through the lower hindquarter (stifle area). Heavily muscled stock are thickest here. They also stand with their hind legs further apart than lightly muscled stock.

There are three broad categories of shape – average, poor and good. Picking the differences when they are as simple and clear as this is not difficult (see Fig 3).

Most British-type steers would be classified as average shape. If an animal appears better than average then the assessor needs to distinguish whether this change is due to an increase in subcutaneous fat cover, or to an increase in muscle. Fatter animals generally do not exhibit the roundness or convexity which is present in more heavily muscled animals. Well-muscled, leaner cattle display clearly evident seams between the muscles of the hindquarter. Poorly-muscled cattle are thin through the stifle and are clearly widest across the hip area.

When shape differences are as clear as in figure 3, assessment is easy. However, within the normal cattle population differences in shape are far less
distinctive. It is these situations which can cause confusion. To help separate animals with smaller differences a more expansive descriptive scoring system (5 scores) was developed based on the three levels as in figure 3, but expanded to include quite good muscle development (e.g. heavily muscled European breed bull) and quite low muscle development (e.g. poorly muscled dairy breed cow).

Figure 3. The three simple shape categories

Good
Wide, well-rounded topline; maximum width through stifle; has a wide stance and the stomach cannot be seen.

Average
Not as wide or well-rounded over the topline; hip bones can be seen; has a narrow stance and the stomach is clearly visible.

Poor
Narrower over topline, tapering through stifle; narrower stance; more prominent hip bones; stomach is more clearly visible.

Muscle Score Categories
A score from A (very heavily muscled) to E (lightly muscled) can be given based on the roundness (convexity) and thickness of the body due to muscle (see the illustrations below).

To help distinguish smaller differences between animals, and add continuity to the scoring system, the five scores can be further extended to 15 by adding plus and minus to each score (A+ to E-).
Table 2. A user’s guide to general types of cattle which fit into muscle score categories. The score A+ is reserved for double muscle cattle. All scores referred to here can apply to non-double muscle cattle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bulls</th>
<th>Steers/Yearlings</th>
<th>Heifers</th>
<th>Cows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Very Heavy</strong></td>
<td>European types and Exceptional British types</td>
<td>Rare European types and Exceptional British types</td>
<td>Extreme types</td>
<td>Extreme types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Heavy</strong></td>
<td>European types</td>
<td>European crosses</td>
<td>European types, their crosses and High British</td>
<td>European types, their crosses and High British</td>
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<td></td>
<td>European crosses</td>
<td>High muscle British breed types</td>
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<td></td>
<td>High muscle Bos indicus</td>
<td>High muscle Bos indicus</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>C. Medium</strong></td>
<td>Most British and Bos indicus types</td>
<td>Most slaughter steers and Bos indicus</td>
<td>Average to high British and Bos indicus types</td>
<td>Average to high British and Bos indicus types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low muscle European types</td>
<td>British breeds and Bos indicus</td>
<td></td>
<td>Some Europeans</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Best dairy types</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>D. Moderate</strong></td>
<td>Best dairy breeds</td>
<td>Average to low muscled British and Bos indicus types and Bos indicus</td>
<td>Most beef breed types and Bos indicus</td>
<td>Most beef breed cows and Bos indicus</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>British/Bos indicus types</td>
<td>Dairy breeds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E. Light</strong></td>
<td>Most dairy breeds</td>
<td>Dairy types</td>
<td>Very ‘leggy’ light heifers</td>
<td>Dairy breeds and low-muscle beef breeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extremely low British and Bos indicus types</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: Derived from R. Gaden, NSW Agriculture Beef Marketing Workshop Handbook, 1992
E. Light muscling

- Dairy type – very angular
- Sharp ‘tent topped’ over top line
- Virtually no thickness through stifle at all
- Stands with feet together; concave thigh

Further reading


Acknowledgments

This Primefact replaces the previous Agfact A2.3.35, which replaced A2.3.27 Assessing cattle for muscle by M. Elliot, R. Gahan and B Sundstrom, 1987.

Editorial assistance: Bob Gaden, Technical Specialist (Quality Beef).

Artwork: Bridget Cumming.

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ISSN 1832-6668

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Job number 7113