



CHARACTERISTICS OF 2008 TOP-PLACING STEERS AT HOUSTON

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Live and carcass data on the top two steers in each class for 2008 have been released by the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Complete information can be seen at <http://www.hlsr.com/ag/lr/downloads/2008SteersCarcass.pdf>. Yearly averages from 1974 to 2008 are at <http://beef.tamu.edu/academics/beef/pub/trends.pdf>. The following summarizes the 2008 data by characteristic, with some comparisons to previous years:

LIVE WEIGHT – was turned in by the exhibitor for the first time this year. The average was 1251 lb, a little less than current slaughter steer industry average, and about the same as the previous high in 2004. Average of the three types (British, American, and Continental) differed little. The individual range was from 1065 lb for the first-place lightweight AOB to 1440 lb for the second-place heavyweight Chianina. Average weights for 2005 to 2007 ranged from 1237 lb to 1241 lb. It could be that live weight has about stabilized. In 1974 (when the minimum was 900 lb), the average was 1038 lb. Minimum weight was increased to the current 1000 lb in 1987, and the average that year was 1172 lb.

CARCASS WEIGHT – averaged 820 lb, again close to the previous high of 821 lb in 2004, and ranged from 679 lb to 967 lb. A total of 11 % of carcasses weighed more than 900 lb and were disqualified from qualification for carcass premiums.

DRESSING PERCENT – averaged 65.6% (individuals ranged from 60.6 to 71.4), which is a couple of percent or so above finished cattle average. Continentals dressed a little higher than the other two types. Dressing percent averaged 66-67% in the 1980s, when show steers were being shrunk more to produce the trim middles that were in fashion at the time.

FAT COVER – averaged 0.41 inches (ranging from 0.08 to 0.84). Americans averaged slightly lower and British slightly higher than Continentals. Industry average is around one-half inch. Average of previous 10 years was 0.47. Lowest fat thicknesses were in the late 1970s to early 1980s (0.35 to 0.39).

RIBEYE AREA – averaged 15.2 sq in (ranging from 11.7 to 18.3). Continentals averaged slightly larger and British slightly smaller than Americans. Over the last seven years, the average has ranged from 14.8 to 15.3. Ribeye area has increased over the years as steers have increased in weight. In the late 1970s, ribeyes averaged from 12.5 to 12.9. Many of the high-quality branded beef programs, such as Certified Angus Beef®, have a maximum ribeye area of 16.0 sq in. There were 27 % of the 2008 carcasses that exceeded that size.

RIBEYE AREA/ CWT CARCASS – is a better indication of muscling than area alone without consideration of weight. The average this year was 1.85 sq in/cwt. There was little difference among the three types. Since 1974, the range has been from 1.73 to 1.92. There is some thinking that slick-shearing has led to more muscular animals being favored by judges. Slick-shearing started in 1993. From then through 2008, REA/cwt averaged 1.83, exactly the same as the average from 1974 through 1992. So, muscling of the top two steers at Houston evidently has not increased during the slick-shearing era.

USDA YIELD GRADE – is based primarily on fat thickness and ribeye area to predict percent lean yield. This year's average was 2.08 (ranging from 0.56 to 3.68), second best ever. Continentals and Americans were about the same, and British were slightly higher numerically (slightly lower lean yield). Average Yield Grade with slick-shearing is 2.46, compared to 2.42 for pre-shear. So, as for muscling, carcass composition has not changed.

MARBLING – is the primary factor in USDA Quality Grade. The average this year was Small 52. (For youthful carcasses, A Maturity, Small 00 is the minimum for USDA Choice.) This is the highest marbling ever and is similar to current industry-wide average. Continentals were slightly higher than British and Americans were slightly lower. Industry-wide, British generally tend to marble higher. Marbling has averaged about one-half degree higher in the 2000s than in the 1980s to early 90s.

PERCENT CHOICE OR PRIME – averaged 61 %, as for marbling the highest ever. Continentals were highest and Americans lowest.

HIP HEIGHT – was measured in most years from 1981 through 2003 but had not been done since then. The average this year was 51.0 inches, ranging from 48 1/2 to 54 1/4. (This average is about four inches, or two Frame Scores, shorter than the peak heights of the late 1980s.) That is a Frame Score of low-4 to mid-4 if we assume these steers average about 18-months old or upper-4 to low-5 for 15-month-old steers. Reduction in height is most apparent in heavier Continentals. In the mid-80s heavyweight Continentals generally measured around 57 inches, compared to around 51 inches this year, a decrease from Frame Score 7 to Frame Score 4.

Compared to current industry-wide slaughter averages, these steers were about average in USDA Carcass Quality Grade and superior in USDA Yield Grade. Over the years, steers have increased in Quality Grade, remained about the same in Yield Grade, and decreased drastically in Frame Score. Compared to 20-25 years ago, today's winning steers have bigger bodies of about the same composition on considerably shorter legs.