

# HOW TO SELECT A FINISHED STEER

by William Lipsey

How do you know when a steer is “just right” and ready to go? Unless you have an ultrasound machine it is impossible to look at the carcass to determine the finish. Experience is the best teacher. Learning the right look and feel to know when the animal is ready takes time and just doing it. There are some things to look for.

## Age & Weight

A scale is an essential piece of equipment. As discussed in the previous articles you should be looking for your Highland steer to be finished at 24-36 months of age and with a weight range of 950-1250 lbs., crosses may be a little larger. If the animal weighs 800 lbs., give it some more time, if it weighs over 1300, then it's probably past time that it should be gone. Three hundred pounds is a large range so using a scale alone will not tell you when the animal is finished.

## Visual Appraisal

There are certain signs you should look for in a finished animal. The brisket should start to fill in giving the animal a wide front-end look. Looking at the animal from the side you want the animal to look balanced from the front to the rear. If the back half looks sucked up, then it probably needs more time. Looking over the animal's top either from the front or the back can be useful also. You want a wide filled in top line, look for fullness behind the front shoulders. Fat deposits around the tailhead are a good indicator also. This is one of the last areas that they will put on fat.

## “Hands on” Appraisal

Many experts will tell you the only way to evaluate an animal, particularly a Highland is by feeling it. You want some cover over the rib



*A nice steer is level on the top and bottom. On a finished steer you can see some fullness in his brisket and roundness to his rump.*

cage. If the ribs are easily seen or felt then it needs some more time. They should feel smooth and require pressure to feel the underlying bones. This should be true of the loin also. Feel the tail head, again looking for fat deposits. Between an animal's legs, at the castration site or with a heifer at the udder, is another place to look for fat. Look for thickness in the front and rear flanks.

If you are just starting out go to your local fair and watch the steer show. Some extension or cattle organizations will run programs at feedlots to evaluate when steers are finished. Check with local 4H groups to see if they will be running any steer judging programs. Check your own animals daily and look carefully for some of the aforementioned changes. This part is more art than science and experience will be your best teacher.