

Calf Talk Newsletter

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Heifer Buyers Beware

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There are new entrants into the world of raising Holstein heifers. Former veal raisers, and others with facilities, that want to get into the high priced heifer business are finding many land mines along the way. "Freemartens" are some of them. A "freemarten" is the result of being born twin to a bull. The sex organs of the bull calf fetus develop in utero prior to the development of the female organs. Circulating male hormones then suppress the proper development of the female sex organs. The resulting heifer calf is born without a complete reproductive tract and will not become pregnant. If the developing fetus is contained in it's own placenta without a connection to the bull calf's placenta the male hormones can not circulate through the developing heifer and the heifer should be born normal. However, a normal heifer occurs a small percentage of the time. (I am not sure of the exact percentage, but I have seen 10% quoted as the incidence of a normal heifer born with a twin bull.) There is usually some connection between the placentas of the two calves.

The majority of dairymen will not sell their best heifer calves. They take the calves they do not want to the sale barn. The result is there is an extremely high percentage of the heifer calves, in the sale barn, that are freemartens. Hoard's Dairyman published an article describing a method of using a probe to detect a normal vagina in contrast to one of a freemarten. Nasco sells a vaginal probe for detecting freemartens. Calf dealers and heifer

buyers picked up on the probe technique. But instead of a probe some are using a ball point pen. In my discussions concerning freemartens, my savvy heifer raisers tell me they "pencil" the new purchases and take the freemartens back to the sale barn. Now I find some baby calves that have been "pencilled hard", so the calf will pass the test for the next person who "pencils" her.

Many of the freemartens have been through a series of sale barns. An unsuspecting buyer figures there will be a small percentage of freemartens, but under the present situation the buyer can end up with a truck load of freemartens. I am aware of a heifer raiser that fed a group of 50 heifer calves to 700 pounds and then found he had 48 out of the 50 that were freemartens.

A new business has developed. Most heifer buyers are aware twin heifer calves are usually lightweight and try to buy at least a 90-pound calf to avoid the freemartens. A calf feeder can buy the 70# calf for \$1 per pound and feed it to 100#. Now he has converted the \$1 per pound to \$3 or \$4 per pound. It is usually profitable to put 20 to 30 pounds on a baby calf for a gain of more than \$200. It sure beats feeding veal.

So the rule is "BUYER BEWARE"!!!