

# 'Rookies' are your future: 3 tips for assessing their first year

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Every team has its own philosophy on developing young talent. The goal for most coaches is to turn all first-year players, the rookies, into dependable assets that can have a big impact on the game while setting the team up for long-term success.

Considered a rookie, a first-lactation cow can and should have a positive impact and contribute to the herd's bottom line. However, the first year in the parlor can be filled with ups and downs. As the coach, you need to analyze her performance and determine if she is helping or hurting your team's average milk production and profitability. Looking at how your first-lactation cows' performance stacks up to your mature cows might give you some answers.

## **Animal size and maturity at calving matters**

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First question: Are your rookies undersized? The goal is to have first-calf heifers of sufficient size and maturity at calving. The rule of thumb is that they should calve at 22 months and be 85% of the size and weight of mature cows in your herd. If they are undersized, the feed they eat will go more toward growth and less toward milk production.

If they calve later than 22 months, it can cost up to \$10 per head per day for every day they show up late to the parlor. This dollar amount is based on factoring in the carrying cost (feed expenses plus operating costs) and missed milk revenue.

Along with evaluating size and age, a rookie's milk production should be at least 80% of mature animals for peak and lactation. The First Defense team and I have customers that we work with pushing 90% peak and lactation milk production of mature animals. That achievement has really helped them maximize facility and investment efficiencies.

## **Early challenges can have lasting effects**

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Most coaches agree that successful players emerge from good feeder programs. What if your rookie analysis shows there is an opportunity to improve the numbers? It means looking back at the entire calf and heifer program and developing the rookies more effectively before they reach the parlor. Is there an obvious bottleneck where calves are slow to take off or heifers plateau or even lose momentum? Where is the opportunity to do better?

A wise calf consultant once told me, "A calf never gets a second chance to get a good start." On day one, you are setting up that calf for a lifetime of health and performance. Achieving passive immunity is the critical first step. Getting good-quality colostrum into the calf in the first hours of life is priority. Calves should receive about 10% to 15% of their birthweight, which equals about 4 quarts. Multiple feedings of colostrum or even good-quality transition

milk for second or third feedings will help provide additional improved nutrition and immunity.

How would you rank your colostrum management program? According to a 2014 USDA National Animal Health Monitoring System study, 13.5% of 1,005 Holstein heifer calves from the eastern region of the U.S. (Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Virginia and Wisconsin) had failure of passive transfer. This failure can result in increased risk for morbidity and mortality, plus a reduced rate of gain, a higher culling rate and lower milk production once these calves hit the parlor.

## **Early health incident prevention is critical**

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Along with good nutrition, it's important for athletes to stay healthy. It is the same for your calves. How can we do even better with calves, protecting them against the most common health challenges?

Preventing scours and the respiratory issues that often follow will not only save labor and treatment cost, but more importantly, it keeps heifers gaining every day. We're working with many farmers who have a 99% or greater completion rate and zero treatments for scours and respiratory issues. Daily weight gain along with a healthy immune system can go a long way to meeting first-lactation goals and maximizing profitability.

Even if you are using a calf ranch and ship your calves on day one, it's important to make that first day the best it can possibly be. Early investment can help increase long-term performance and profitability of the animals you get back.

The team and I walk hutches and maternity pens and love to visit with farmers and talk about goals, from the first few hours of birth to first lactation and beyond. Getting calves off to a good start is key to reaching first-lactation goals. We like to help set calves up for success from day one, including reducing treatments and decreasing costs. Healthy calves turn into productive rookies (first-lactation heifers) who help you win the game as profitable cows.



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