

What is the issue with the dressing percentage?



PHILLIP STRYDOM
DEPARTMENT OF ANIMAL SCIENCE, STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY
pestrydom@sun.ac.za

In animal production, like in many other manufacturing operations, “efficiency” is always the bottom line. I must admit while it is very important when considering that our final goal is to feed an ever-increasing world population, it sometimes takes the elegance out of farming. All decisions are made on cold financial facts.

Despite this, we are probably still not farming with a single type of animal, one breed, produced according to certain principles but still have a variety of breeds farmed under different conditions under different production systems. Somehow it works for most of us. Yet, so often there are debates about what breed is the best, just like there are debates about bakkies and tractors, but fortunately, mostly not about political parties anymore.

I have heard that apart from many other characteristics like marbling, animal size, performance in the feedlot and others, Nguni cattle are also criticized for their poor dressing percentage – apparently because of large intestines. So, I was asked to elaborate a bit on this issue,

and this is my attempt to provide some scientific input into the matter.

Dressing percentage is defined as the proportion or percentage that the dressed carcass contributes to the whole live animal. For the producer selling his animals directly to the abattoir, dressing % is not important because in most cases he is compensated on a carcass weight basis, not paid for the live animal. In the feedlot or auction business, it is important because the live animal is purchased and if the animal dresses out poorly, the buyer will lose money. Very often these buyers reason that breeds, such as Nguni cattle, do not dress out well, so they discount the purchase price.

Is this true?

The dressing percentage of cattle can vary between roughly 48 to 60+ percent, which is quite substantial in financial terms.

Technically, if one wants to compare the dressing percentage of two animals, they must be treated exactly the same before slaughter. Should you starve an animal before slaughter, the dressing % will obviously be higher due to less gut content. Therefore, when somebody boasts about their cattle dressing out above 60%, ask the

question whether those figures are based on a shrunken weight (starved) or full rumen (volpens).

There are a couple of other factors affecting dressing percentage as well. These are maturity type, combined with the size of the animal, fatness, or condition of the animal, feeding system, to some extent breed, and then the use of growth promoters.

As a rule of thumb, later maturing breeds such as Charolais and Simmental will dress out higher IF they are slaughtered at the same level of fatness as earlier maturing animals.

This is for the simple reason that these animals are larger and heavier, and the carcass part of the whole animal is proportionally (therefore as a percentage) more and non-carcass parts less than that of smaller earlier maturing breeds.

Grass-fed animals dress out lower due to proportionally larger intestines which must accommodate more bulky feed than grain-fed animals. When comparing animals of the same breed, and the one animal is fatter than the other, the fatter animal will dress out higher as the additional fat is added to the body weight, while the fifth quarter (non-carcass) parts will weigh the same. These are only true with kidney and kidney fat included in carcass weight. Certain breeds dress out higher than others due to having proportionally smaller non-carcass parts such as intestines, heads, or skins. For the same reason, some breeds dress out lower than “average” due to larger non-carcass parts.

In these cases, these may be due to the adaptative traits these breeds possess. Double-muscled animals like the Belgian blue will dress out higher than other breeds, for obvious reasons. Apart from this breed, I shall refrain from mentioning breed names.

Finally, animals fed beta-agonists (zilpaterol) while grain-feeding dress out higher due to more muscling – the same reason as with the Belgian blue.

When considering Nguni cattle, it is an earlier maturing animal and was bred that way for certain reasons. Therefore, a grain-fed Nguni steer will probably dress out

less than a Charolais of the same fatness. However, in various trials we have performed, grain-fed Nguni cattle compared very well regarding dressing percentage with other breeds of medium maturity (e.g Drakensberger, Santa, Bonsmara, etc.). The breed is therefore by no means inferior in this way.

As a matter of fact, when Nguni cattle were backgrounded and were grown out some more before finishing, their dressing percentages were similar to other breeds of the same weight and condition. These tell us it is a matter of size and not a specific breed that is at stake here.

Nguni-oxen (stoor-os), if rounded off on grass, may well have a lower dressing percentage than grain-fed animals of the same size because of diet (as explained above).

I hope this provides some clarity on dressing percentage. If there are any disagreements, I would gladly listen to them.

Whether Nguni cattle dress out higher or lower fortunately does not influence the quality of its steak, which is of very good quality when the animal is properly slaughtered.

No debate about that!

