



Biography:

Dr. Colin Palmer is an Associate Professor of Theriogenology (Animal Reproduction) at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine. Originally from Nova Scotia, Dr. Palmer worked in mixed practices in Ontario and British Columbia and has owned/operated a practice in Saskatchewan. Dr. Palmer along with his wife Kim and children Lauren, Emily and Carter run a herd of purebred Red Angus cattle under the KC Cattle Co. name.

Twins

“More of a Curse than a Blessing”

What kind of a cattlemen wouldn't be excited about an extra calf being born? Anything else is like lookin' a gift horse in the mouth, right?

Ever since I was a kid, I have had more than my fair share of twin calves born. We had a small herd of commercial cattle and twins were pretty rare. That changed when I entered the cattle business. I must have been about 14 or 15 years old and I had just one cow of my own. I can still remember my father telling me one evening that my cow had calved but unfortunately, the calf was dead. He consoled me by saying, “that's farmin, losses are something you get used to.” The next morning he came into the kitchen skaking his head saying he couldn't believe the luck of this boy; that cow had given birth to a second calf and it was up nursing. Wow! I thought this farmin' thing was alright after all.

When I first got my start in the Red Angus business, I used embryo transfer to expand my herd. My first flush resulted in 8 transferable embryos translating into 6 live calves but the real icing on the cake was the twin heifers the donor cow gave birth to, just a few weeks after the ET calves. What a start to a breeding program! Over the next several years, I had continued to have more than my fair share of twins. This year I had 3 sets in the first 15 calvings.

There are many factors affecting twinning in a beef herd: breed, breed lines (cow family) and nutrition are the ones we know about for sure. The bull (sire of the twins) has really nothing to do with it, provided he produces good quality semen. The sperm he deposited are just opportunists. It's an: if there are eggs present, will fertilize sort of thing! Nutrition – cows in good body condition before calving and cows on a rising plane of nutrition after

calving, including adequate mineral supplementation are more likely to rebreed sooner and be more fertile. Cows that are twinning or come from twinning breed lines are more likely to be better embryo transfer flushers and are generally very fertile cows. Another potential reason for twins may be estrus synchronization. We use AI extensively in our herd and can boast some outstanding conception rates. I like to tinker with my protocols, too, and am now pretty certain that there is a higher incidence of twinning associated with one of my protocols. For several years, all of my cases of twins have resulted from that one protocol... high pregnancy rates but lots of twins. Not all of the protocols are like that, so don't be afraid of the technology. From year to year, I will hear of producers having more sets of twins than usual. Most of the time, the higher twinning rate can be attributed to better nutrition during the preceding breeding season. Recently, I heard of a producer who claims to have fixed his twinning problem – he quit feeding minerals. I don't like this solution and can't help wonder how overall herd fertility and calf performance will be affected. It is often the least apparent losses that cost us the most!

Sure, there is an obvious upside to twins - you get two calves to sell or you are able to cross-foster calves onto cows that have lost their calves; here is why I am so cynical. Twin pregnancies are at a much greater risk of abortion and dystocia and very often, one or both twins can have contracted tendons or other congenital anomalies. Twins left on their mother, if she takes them both, are probably equivalent to 1.5 calves and they often take so much out of her that she requires extra care to keep her in decent shape. Not many of us have

the time or can afford the time to fiddle with feeding a disowned twin or getting another cow to take the calf. Have you ever figured out what it will cost you to raise a calf on milk replacer, not to mention your labour? Maybe you can buy a dairy cow to feed the extra calves but most vets will tell you not to do this, because the risk of bringing in a new disease is just too great. The beef business has changed a great deal in the last few years. Small producers like me have off-farm jobs and large producers have to keep more cattle. Either way cows need to calve on their own! Plain and simple as that! Breeds that require most of the calves to be born by C-Section or tend to have high maintenance calves are not viable in the main stream. I think this is also

why there is a growing negative attitude towards twins in the commercial sector...nobody has time for them. As a purebred producer, I will admit that a nice pair of twin bulls or heifers is a bonus, if they are healthy and you can raise them right but this is the exception not the norm. Mixed twins are a real pain! The heifer is usually a freemartin and more often than not, I can't make a bull out of the male. So, around our place a set of twins is more of a cause for grumbling rather than celebration and I am pretty sure there are others that share the same view. Having said that, don't you agree that once calving season is over and the new crop is growing nicely those little disappointments quickly become a fading memory?