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The nursery pig is built before weaning

Ioannis Mavromichalis, MSc, PhD

This issue examines why nursery performance often originates long before weaning and argues that lifetime pig performance is built through biological continuity from gestation to the nursery rather than through isolated production phases.

A few years ago, during a discussion with a large U.S. integrator, I was asked a question many nutritionists have heard before:

"When do you think my finishing pigs can really achieve their maximum potential?"

My answer caught him completely off guard.

"When I am allowed to feed the grandmothers of those pigs while they are carrying the mothers of your future market hogs."

He laughed at first. Then he looked at me and asked, "You're serious, aren't you?"

And I was.

Because after implementing this philosophy in practice, we verified something I had suspected for many years: performance does not begin in the finishing barn. It does not even begin in the nursery. In many cases, it begins one or even two generations earlier.

Perhaps one of the biggest mistakes in modern swine production is that we manage pigs in phases, whereas pigs experience life continuously.

Piglet vitality starts during gestation

Birth weight and piglet vitality are influenced long before farrowing. Maternal nutrition, body condition, parity, and gilt development all influence how piglets begin life. Weak nursery pigs are rarely created after weaning. By the time we identify them after weaning, much of their biological trajectory has already been established.

Colostrum determines early success

No feed additive will replace colostrum. Piglets that fail to consume sufficient high-quality colostrum begin life with disadvantages in immunity, vitality, and growth potential. Many fall-behind pigs can be traced back to the first hours after birth. The nursery phase often inherits problems that originated in the farrowing room.

Sow intake drives weaning quality

Modern sows are expected to nurse increasingly larger litters. Milk production ultimately depends on intake of high-density feed during lactation. And, because milk production determines piglet growth, sow nutrient intake indirectly determines nursery pig quality. Heavy and uniform pigs are easier nursery pigs.

But, more importantly, they are easier pigs to manage throughout the entire production system.

Creep feeding and nursery feed intake

The purpose of creep feeding is not simply to increase weaning weight. Its greatest value lies in familiarizing piglets with dry feed before weaning. Piglets that recognize feed after weaning generally start eating sooner and experience fewer setbacks. Continuity always favors performance. The nursery should not become the first time piglets encounter dry feed no matter the weaning age.

Variation compounds system-wide

Variation introduced in the farrowing house rarely disappears later. Differences in birth weight, colostrum intake, milk production, and early growth become differences in nursery performance, medication needs, and finishing weights. The nursery does not create all variability. More often, it amplifies variability that already exists. High quality nursery nutrition can mitigate this but only to a certain level and at some considerable expense.

Better piglets improve the entire system

The benefits of good early-life management extend far beyond nursery feed cost and nursery performance. Fewer fall-behind pigs mean:

- lower treatment costs;
- improved barn flow;
- reduced labor pressure;
- more predictable finishing inventories;
- improved throughput;
- and ultimately more pigs sold per sow.

These are not nursery metrics. These are system metrics.

In brief, modern swine production systems often separate responsibilities by phase. Feed is often bought from different suppliers for each phase. But pigs do not recognize those boundaries.

In reality, high lifetime performance begins long before a market pig is born and continues uninterrupted throughout its life. The most successful systems are often the systems that stop managing phases and start managing biological continuity.

Because in the end, the nursery pig is built before weaning.

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