

When COVID-19 restrictions prevented the traditional sale crowd, Scott Sell turned online for the Clemson Edisto Bull Test and Heifer Sale.



# WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A VIRTUAL WAY

COVID-19 meant this Georgia family had to add a new tool to their bull-buying kit.

*Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor*

There were some long faces at Godbee Farms when the announcement was made that the Oct. 10 Clemson Edisto Bull Test and Heifer Sale was going online. The culprit was COVID-19, and it was the only way Scott Sell, the researcher in charge of the sale, could meet Clemson University mandates and still conduct the sale. While the Godbees understood, they love going to a good cattle sale, especially ones featuring Angus cattle.

“We get to meet and network with others in the Angus industry and learn how they’re managing their cattle,” says Ellis Godbee Jr. “It also helps us expand our market for selling heifers bred to calving-ease Angus bulls.”

“There is the social aspect of sales,” says Ellis’s brother, Selwyn. “It is good to develop relationships with people.”

When the Edisto sale went online, however, the cattlemen didn’t let it stop them from buying the calving-ease Angus bull they had their eyes on. They did what

they usually do when they’re confronted with a challenge: They used the team approach. Their father and founder of Godbee Farms, Ellis Godbee Sr., led the way, with an assist from Ellis Jr.’s 14-year-old son, Joshua,



representing the third generation of Godbee cattle producers.

## Do your homework

First, the commercial Angus producers did their homework. They studied the expected progeny difference (EPD) values, actual performance data and videos of the Angus bulls offered in the sale. All of these were found in the online sale book produced by Angus Media.

The Godbees had faith in the way the bulls were tested, since they had known Sell for years.

He lives near the Godbees and knows them from his time as a farm supply dealer and county agent.

“Scott would bring his crew and help us work our cattle,” says Ellis Sr. “He makes time for us.”

“We are very impressed by the way he feeds the bulls on the forage test,” he adds.

In turn, Sell had faith in the way a bull or bulls would be managed on their farm.

“They’re a great family and do a great job with their cattle,” he says.

## Personal visit

Next, the Godbees drove to Blackville, S.C., site of the forage test, to actually view the bulls. Even though Clemson COVID guidelines prevented an in-person sale, potential buyers were allowed to come look at the bulls and heifers by appointment. Sell says up to 75 buyers did just that, and the number of phone calls before the sale tripled.

“If producers hadn’t come to see the cattle in person,” he says, “the sale wouldn’t have been nearly so successful.”

“I think we would have been hesitant to buy if we hadn’t seen the bulls in person,” says Ellis Jr. “They looked better in person than they did online.”

## Register early

Once they had seen the bulls offered for sale, Selwyn and Ellis Jr. registered with the online

company holding the sale and set up buyer accounts.

Ellis Jr. and Selwyn said registration was fairly painless. Ellis Jr. also had a bit of a head start since he was already used to buying and selling purebred goats online.

“It was pretty straightforward,” Selwyn says. “It took five minutes to register and another five minutes to set up the buyer’s account. They did have an approval process that required a major credit card, but the approval was done quickly.”

Ellis Jr. adds, “We called them an hour before the sale to get the buyer’s account.”

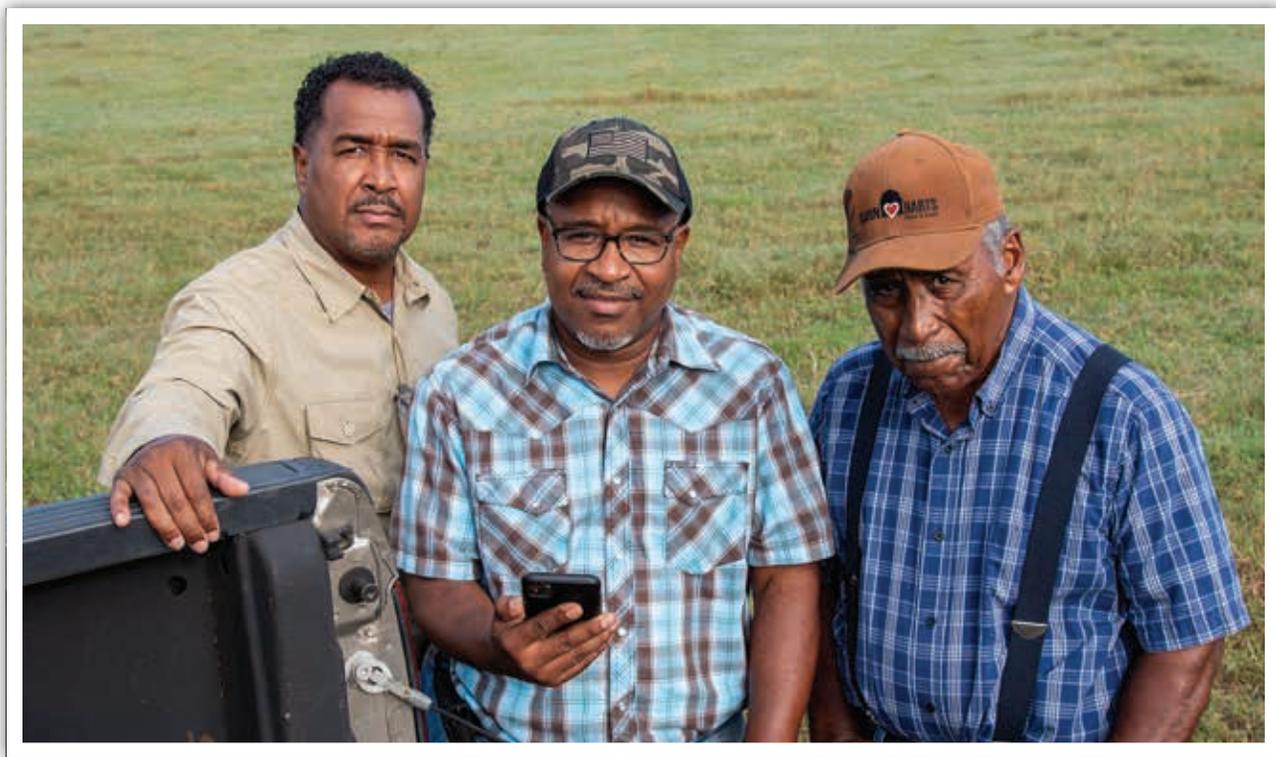
While the two brothers are tech-savvy, they both recommend going through the tutorial offered on the auction company’s website.

“That really helped,” says Selwyn.

## Sale day

When it was time for the sale, Ellis Sr. and Selwyn parked in the senior Godbee’s rural Waynesboro, Ga., living room with phones and Selwyn’s laptop in hand. Ellis Jr. went to nearby Augusta, Ga., with his smartphone to make sure they had a fast and reliable internet connection.

Normally, the sale is hosted at the Edisto Research and Education Center sale facility, but this time, it was in the auditorium, empty except for those running the sale.



Rather than move the animals through a ring, videos of each animal were shown on the auction company website as the bidding took place.

When the bidding on the live sale actually started, Selwyn did the honors on the laptop, and Ellis Jr. stayed on the phone with Selwyn and his dad.

“During the bidding process, when you click on the bid link, it tells you whether you are in or out and where the price is,” he describes.



Above: Selwyn Godbee, Ellis Godbee Jr. and Ellis Godbee Sr. tackled the online purchasing challenge as a team.

Left: The commercial Angus producers did their homework to purchase the right bulls for their heifers.

“It was overwhelmingly good. I had no more than eight people tell me they couldn’t, or wouldn’t, bid online. I even had a couple of people tell me they liked online bidding better.”

To accommodate those who weren’t comfortable bidding online, Sell set up a phone line and gave each of them a pass code and buyer’s number. He ended up selling three bulls over the phone, but the rest of the 40 bulls and 40 heifers sold online.

“Interest was much greater than usual,” says Sell. “I don’t know if it was because of the heifers or because the sale was online or both.”

He says the bidders included those who weren’t tech-literate.

“I even had an 87-year-old ask me to walk him through the process. He said he didn’t want to get COVID, and his son-in-law was going to help him bid.”

Overall, more than 600 bids came through. The sale average on the bulls, \$2,790, was right at what it has been the last four years. The heifers were the real stars of the



Scott Sell, charged with adapting the Clemson Edisto Bull Test and Heifer Sale, was pleased with the turnout for the sale. He ended up selling three bulls over the phone, but the rest of the 40 bulls and 40 heifers sold online. “Interest was much greater than usual,” says Sell. “I don’t know if it was because of the heifers or because the sale was online or both.”

They were the successful bidders for the bull they wanted and took a check to pay for the bull the day they picked him up.

“It went so smoothly,” says Ellis Jr. “Every bull we’ve ever bought has been in person, but this is a wonderful story of progression.”

No kidding. In 1973 Ellis Sr., now 78 years old, bought his first Angus bull from an ad in the *Augusta Chronicle* for the grand total of \$300.

Selwyn says, “I asked Daddy, ‘Did you ever think we would be sitting here looking at a computer and buying bulls online?’ ”

## Evaluating the day

The Godbees’ positive experience was common, says Sell.

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show, though, at \$1,975. Consigned by producers and Clemson University, the bred heifers were mostly commercial, but did include a handful of registered Angus. All were graduates of Edisto's first heifer development program and were bred to calving-ease Angus bulls.

Edisto was the first sale veteran auctioneer Carroll Cannon has done completely online.

"It really worked. I was blown away by how successful it was," he says. "There were no glitches."

### Recommendations

To keep the process glitch-free on their end during the sale, Ellis Jr. says, "We had a good internet connection and had a phone as a backup."

Sell agrees. "Three or four people had trouble bidding, but it was related to internet connectivity."

Ellis Jr. adds, "Find a quiet location so you can hear the auctioneer and not be distracted."

Cannon says that is important to the auctioneer, too. He has done two sales on Zoom, and says the first was a learning experience.

"We had 110 people on the call and all the background noise that comes with it," he recalls. "We learned we could teach the producers to mute themselves and unmute it when they wanted to bid."

While Brett Spader admires the Godbees' willingness to bid online, he says there are other options, even if a sale is hosted strictly online or by phone.

"Leave an order with an American Angus Association regional manager," he offers, noting many breeders do a sight-



Above: Ellis Godbee Sr. with his heifers.

Below: Joshua (left) and Ellis Godbee Jr. added their tech savvy to their online purchasing.



unseen guarantee if an animal is bought this way.

He gives the Godbees two thumbs up for doing their homework before the sale.

"Being prepared is paramount. Buyers have to do their research. Call your regional manager and the sale manager," he advises. "We can't overemphasize the importance of studying pedigrees, EPDs, inspecting the animals in person and, most of all, having a solid relationship with the breeder."

"Study the sale book, find out the seedstock producer's philosophy," he continues. "We don't want impulse purchases. The seedstock breeders want customers to find the right bulls for their operation and to be customers for life."

There is one more thing that helps, and that is having the senior Godbee's eye for choosing profitable Angus cattle. Think back

to that first Angus bull, the one he bought for \$300.

"He wasn't even weaned when I bought him," Ellis Sr. recalls. "That was in August, and I picked him up in October. I used him lightly the first year and sold him after three years for \$400."

Given his track

record, you might want to put in your reservation for the replacement heifers he breeds to him. Even though he can add virtual bull-buying to his résumé, he'd much rather you come visit and buy in person.

First, though, you can introduce yourself at the next in-person bull sale.

"I just enjoy them," he states. |

Editor's note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, Ga.

### When attending isn't possible

"There's no replacement for being at a live cattle auction — seeing the cattle firsthand; visiting with the owner and neighbors about the set of cattle and the industry, for that matter; visiting with your regional manager; listening to the auctioneer's chant; reading the crowd as bids are taken," says Brett Spader, president of Angus Media. "It presents the ideal environment for buyer and seller to find the true market value of the cattle offered for sale."

COVID-19 interrupted the 2020 spring sale season, leaving many looking for options on how to sell and to buy seedstock. Some cancelled sales, others postponed and others added alternative ways to bid, such as the online component.

"This spring, we have a year of experience dealing with COVID, and crowds are again filling the seats," Spader says, "but some areas are again facing lockdowns and some folks just won't feel comfortable attending the sales." A proponent of being prepared, Spader worked with the regional managers of the American Angus Association to offer these tips to buyers for the coming sale season:

- ▶ Identify which seedstock breeders you intend to buy cattle from and check in early with them to see how they intend to sell their offering. Will they host a sale or shift to private treaty? If a sale, will they host a crowd and, if so, what precautions will they ask of attendees?
- ▶ Study the sale book and the information provided to preselect potential purchases.
- ▶ View the cattle before sale day. Call the producer and arrange a time to view the cattle before sale day.
- ▶ Periodically check the producer's website and the *angus.org* website for any changes to the "Sales & Events" calendar.
- ▶ If attendance at the sale is not possible, call your regional manager. Regional managers often preview the sale offering and can do a visual inspection of certain lots for you, and they do carry bids to the sale. You may also ask the owner or your regional manager to take a quick video of the animal to share with you ahead of the sale.
- ▶ If you want to do the bidding, but can't attend, check with the seedstock provider to see what other options are available. If they will have an online bidding component, sign up weeks beforehand and familiarize yourself with how it works. Ensure you have adequate internet capabilities.

— by Shauna Rose Hermel