



QUEST TO PRODUCE THE BEST

A 20-year focus on quality genetics led Tennessee cattleman to his marketing niche.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

My original goal was simple — to produce a live calf and sell feeder calves through the Kentucky-Tennessee Livestock Market,” says Leamon Bratton of his 2001 venture to the sale barn with three Hereford calves. “I pulled the calves off the cows, took them to the sale barn, and thought I had found my niche.”

While the Woodlawn, Tenn., producer’s breed of choice and marketing methods changed, one thing didn’t.

“From Day 1, I wanted to take a good-quality calf,” he says.

In pursuit of that goal, Bratton replaced Hereford dams with registered Angus, specifically two bred cows and three bred heifers. Thankfully, he is not easily discouraged. Two of those heifers died calving.

“A newbie doesn’t buy bred heifers,” he notes.

Never one to do things halfway, Bratton jumped into artificial insemination (AI), even though the Guthrie, Ky., sale barn was still his marketing method.

In 2003 he discovered the Certified Preconditioned for Health (CPH) sales, a value-added program where calves are vaccinated, bunk-trained, and sorted into pens of like kind at

the livestock market so they can be sold in groups.

“That extra 5¢ to 10¢ was good money,” he recalls.

However, by 2011, when he was AI-breeding females that were themselves AI-sired and using top-notch cleanup bulls, as well as investing money and time into weaning, vaccinating and feeding the calves, he started questioning the practice.

“I felt like I wasn’t getting paid enough for it,” he says.

Then, University of Tennessee

Above: Leamon Bratton finishes the best-quality calf possible for his friends and family.

extension ag economist (now retired) Emmitt Rawls entered the picture.

Put to the test

“Emmit challenged me to put my calves in the Tennessee feedout program,” Bratton recalls. “He told me I’d learn what’s underneath the hide and find out the true value of my cattle.”

In the Tennessee Beef Evaluation program, producers consign a minimum of five calves. They’re fed out at Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity member feedlots in southwest Iowa and harvested nearby. Producers

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receive a detailed report on everything from their calves' disposition to feedlot gain to carcass grade.

Bratton sent 12 animals in August of 2012.

"The first load, I thought I knew how my cattle would do," he says.

Once again, it is a good thing Bratton isn't easily discouraged. Despite being vaccinated and preconditioned, eight got sick. At the end, four graded USDA Choice and the rest graded USDA Select.

"It stunk," states the perfectionist.

A retired lieutenant colonel, strategic planning was Bratton's specialty. Plan and implement he did. He revamped his vaccination program and transitioned to modified-live-virus (MLV) vaccines, and made sure he followed Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) guidelines to the letter.

DNA-testing since 2007, he also pored over the results, as well as the expected progeny differences (EPDs) on his registered animals.

"Five or six got sick the next year, and the third year we had no sickness," he shares.

At the same time, Bratton started emphasizing marbling and ribeye area in both his natural-service and AI sires.

The closeouts improved. Reaching mid-Choice and *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand quality became the norm, though 2015 was a high mark.

"Eighteen calves brought an average of \$2,400," he says.

Not one to sit on his laurels, Bratton says, "I hadn't hit Prime yet."

Not to worry. After fellow Tennessee cattleman and mentor Bill Freeman talked him into going to the Gardiner Angus Ranch April 2015 sale, resulting in Bratton investing in more carcass-friendly genetics, his closeout sheets looked better year by year.

In August 2020 he sent 12 head to the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity.

"Seven out of 12 went CAB, four went Prime and one was mid-Choice," reports Bratton.

"Leamon got to be an Army colonel by listening, studying and working hard to follow instructions," says Rawls. "He was not and is not a 'have it my own way' producer."

A high bar

There is also attention to detail. The retired lieutenant colonel starts months in advance of his December breeding season by printing out the EPDs of 12 or 13 of the best cows.

"Best is determined by their EPDs," he notes. "I focus on calving-ease direct, birth weight, weaning weight, yearling weight, scrotal circumference and heifer pregnancy. They also need adequate milk, and I want mature height at 0.5 and below."



Left: Even though Leamon Bratton's marketing methods have changed, his goal remains the same — to produce a quality calf.

Next, he skips down to the management category and looks for docility and claw angle.

Then, he hits the carcass numbers.

"The cut line for me on marbling

is anything 1.30 and over. On ribeye, 0.80 and higher. I want a bull that is 1.5 or higher on marbling and 1.08 or higher on ribeye," he explains. "On quality, the bar is forever moving in the Angus breed."

Bratton says he wants accuracies above 0.45 to 0.50.

He insists on getting carcass ultrasounds done on his potential replacement heifers, and requires a 7.0 for intramuscular fat.

While the quality-driven cattleman focused on producing cattle with the best carcass traits possible, his marketing path started to veer a bit.

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Finish the job

While Leamon Bratton starts with top-notch raw material for his freezer-beef operation, genetics aren't the only thing he puts into the cattle. At weaning, normally in mid-May for the 550-pound (lb.) to 700-lb. fall-born calves, they're fenceline weaned, and he hand-feeds a ration of corn gluten, soyhulls and cracked corn.

When the calves quit bawling, usually around five to seven days, Bratton puts them in a pen where he can keep a close eye on them and continues to feed the same ration. He also gives them a second round of vaccinations, boosting the first given before weaning.

After 15-20 days, Bratton puts the calves on grass and continues to hand-feed 3-4 lb. of the grain mix per head per day.

In September, he separates his replacements and puts the finishing calves in his feedlot, where they get the same ration for around 150 days. Normally it takes about 170 days and 2 tons of feed to finish a steer, but Bratton says his get to their 1,350- to 1,450-lb. harvest weight within 150 days and 1.5 tons of feed, thanks to bred-in feed efficiency.



Bratton says he is grateful for the lessons learned from his experience with the Tennessee feedout program with regard to the length of the finishing period.

"Otherwise, I'd harvest them too green," he says.

At harvest, Bratton currently drives to Livingston Meat Processing in Hopkinsville, Ky., which is less than an hour from his farm. He feels fortunate to have them.

"Processing is the Achilles' heel for producers," he states.

While the beef isn't given a USDA quality grade, Bratton says it is at least the equivalent of Choice. Customers come from Georgia to Indiana to pick up their custom orders.

Even with the extra time and expense of direct marketing, he says, "I make more money marketing direct."

There are other benefits, too. When his customers start using the meat, they send him photos of grilled steaks and say they can cut them with a fork, and comment it is the best they've ever eaten.

"That gives me joy," Bratton says.

Changing paths

“In 2013, I had a couple of friends ask if I sold freezer beef,” Bratton says.

The next couple of years it was four or five head, with the remainder from his 28-cow herd still going to the state feedout program. Then came the pandemic, and his freezer-beef market jumped to 10 head.

This past spring, Bratton took the plunge and offered all but his replacement heifers to the freezer-beef enterprise.

“I opened it up May 1. They were all presold, with deposits, by May 2. I have found my niche direct-marketing to my friends and family. Ten out of 16 were repeat customers. Some of these people have been with me for eight years.”

In 2020, Bratton thought the demand might be COVID-driven.

However, after this spring, he reports, “This isn’t a fad. If you have a premium product, they’ll come back.”



Even though these cattle are going in the freezers of friends and family, Bratton pays the same detailed attention to the matings

as he did when they were going to Tri-County. If anything, he’s upped his game.

Three years ago, he called friend and mentor Joe Elliott and asked for the DNA tenderness scores on the cows in his February sale.

“He said, ‘If I’m going to sell beef to consumers, they have to be tender,’” says the Adams, Tenn., Angus breeder. “That’s the first time I’ve had that request.”

He bought one of the cow-calf pairs.

Above: Leamon Bratton pores over the EPDs, DNA results and ultrasound data when he chooses a sire for his cows and heifers.

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“He’s a smart man,” Elliott says. “The biggest thing he did when he came into the business was realize he didn’t have a wealth of knowledge. He sought out people who had been successful. They weren’t necessarily high-profile people, but successful.”

Bratton downplays his accomplishments: “Anybody who is now taking their calves to the sale barn can do the same thing I’ve done. There is no excuse not to. My gift is I have the ability to recognize outlier DNA and GE-EPDs (genomically enhanced EPDs). It has taken trial, error and experience.”

He also refuses to accept anything but the best.

“From Day 1 I wanted to produce the best calf I could,” Bratton says. “I’m going to do the best job I can. That’s the only way I know.”

Editor’s note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlegirl from Cuthbert, Ga. For more about the Tennessee Beef Evaluation program, visit <https://bit.ly/ABB-Bratton1>. For more about the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity, visit <https://bit.ly/ABB-Bratton2>.

Quest for the best starts with Angus

“When I first started, I wanted to raise Red Angus,” says Leamon Bratton. “Mark Barnett, owner of the Kentucky-Tennessee Livestock barn, told me they wouldn’t sell at the livestock barn unless I had a truckload lot. The buyers want black hides. Mark was right.”

He also describes his foray into crossbreeding as a bought lesson. “I got off-track and used Simmental and Gelbvieh,” he recalls. “Crossbreeding is not for me.”

The Woodlawn, Tenn., cattleman’s commitment to the breed and drive to produce only top quality means he owns registered Angus females, as well as registered bulls. A heifer calf he produced had such

exceptional numbers Bratton sold half interest in her to one of his mentors, Kansas Angus breeder Mark Gardiner. Currently, her marbling score is 1.69 with a 1.06 ribeye.

“Mark Gardiner says that is rare air,” Bratton says.

A bull calf, #82, out of one of his registered females, ended up with jaw-dropping DNA scores. Carcass weight was in the top 12%, marbling in the top 14%, ribeye area in the top 2%, and fat in the top 7%. However, Bratton was disappointed because he was in the bottom 75% on tenderness. That, and the fact he doesn’t want to be in the bull-marketing business, means he steered him.

“The way I feed them, tenderness won’t be a problem,” he notes, emphasizing, “I want my friends and family to have the best.”

