



YOUR LINK TO

by RON BOLZE, *director of progeny tests for carcass merit, Certified Angus Beef Program*

Profitability starts with the mama cow

Twice a year the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program Supply Development Team invites four Angus seedstock producers to participate in a two-day "Building Blocks for Success" orientation session designed primarily for licensed distributors of Certified Angus Beef™ product. Participants are exposed to every CAB Program division to create greater awareness of the Program's efforts and to create greater ownership of the CAB Program among distributors and producers alike.

The last activity of this event involves the four seedstock producers' sharing their thoughts on where the beef industry is headed and the resulting future implications for the CAB Program. One of the seedstock producers who has participated is Bill Hodge, Hodge Cattle Co., Pine Mountain, Ga. He has had the opportunity to work with many breeds of cattle during the last 40 years and is in somewhat of a unique position to fully appreciate and relate his thoughts on the Angus breed's greatest strength — maternal efficiency.

I've asked Bill to share his thoughts.

— Ron Bolze

by Bill Hodge
Pine Mountain, Ga.

In this age of rapidly changing technology, purebred-Angus producers are continually provided more and more information to aid their selection and design of seedstock that will ensure profitability for commercial cattlemen. After all, isn't the end-product focus of commercial cattlemen the only real justification for the existence of purebred breeders? With the advent of expected progeny differences (EPDs) for every imaginable heritable trait, breeding beef cattle has become a rather simple endeavor. Right?

Angus are the envy of all other beef breeds and the basis of any crossbreeding system where maternal efficiency and end product are of primary emphasis. The Angus cow's primary purpose is to reproduce in a regular fashion and efficiently convert some type of roughage into edible protein for human consumption. She is typically very good at what she was originally intended to do. Why then do we constantly try to change her?

It made no sense in the '50s and '60s to make her a midget, or to make her look like a

Chianina in the '70s and '80s. It doesn't make sense today to make her grow like a Charolais, milk like a Simmental, cut like a Limousin or marble like Wagyu.

Thank goodness the Angus cow is extremely resilient, and there are dedicated seedstock operations around to correct the problems fads have continually created.

The true breeders of pedigreed beef cattle have a clear understanding that sustainable selection of lasting value is a slow process



and cannot be achieved without patience.

EPDs, within the realm of population genetics, do exactly what they were designed to do. However, they are only a viable tool in a sustainable breeding program. EPDs are like anything else; just because there's more of something does not necessarily mean it's better! It is fundamental that EPDs be matched to environment and management and that profitability be the ultimate selection or culling criteria.

Breeding profitable beef cattle is not that complicated. All producers have to do is identify their end-product users, then back through the system and produce that product as efficiently as their environments will permit.

Reproductive efficiency should be the No. 1 priority within any cow-calf operation, and it needs to be clearly understood that maternal traits are measured by more than just milk EPD.

The ideal Angus cow should be the epitome of "convenience" traits. Fellow Georgian O.G. Daniel provided the following some years ago:

"If you, as a breeder, could design the Angus cow exactly as you want, what would she be like? I believe all of us would demand that she calve at 2 years of age, wean 40% to 60% of her weight in calf at 7 months, and do the same every 12 months for about that many years. If we make her meet these standards, she will take on a form. She will be sound structurally; have a sound, well-attached udder; be able to travel and consume ample roughage; and convert that roughage into beef via milk."

I endorse Daniel's description and add that all of the above should be accomplished with the least amount of input. If maximum maternal efficiency with the least amount of input is accomplished, I believe you can be fairly confident the following will result: The cows will be 4- to 5.5-frame and will weigh 1,000-1,100 pounds (lb.). The only concern about creating cows too small is keeping carcass weights of heifer progeny greater than minimum carcass weight to avoid weight discounts — currently about 550 lb.

Results of a survey conducted by Cattle-Fax confirm the economics of moderate-sized cows. Cows weighing 1,000 lb. had an annual cow cost of \$297; those weighing 1,000-1,100 lb. had an annual cow cost of \$311; bigger cows, up to 1,200 lb., had an annual cow cost of \$332. That much looks like an obvious relationship to feed cost, but it was directly linked to the bottom line. The most profitable group of producers in this survey had annual cow costs of \$270 with cows that weighed 1,054 lb.

It's been said that change is necessary for progress to occur. However, change for the sake of change often leads us in the wrong direction. Those who insist progress is only possible through "genetics of rarity and change" will foster the inconsistencies that hurt the industry unless they realize that the "rare" genetics we seek are those that deliver sustainability, which is driven by profitability.

The Angus breed is built on maternal

efficiency and carcass quality. If your source of commercial bulls raises cattle the way you do, both traits can be provided in the same package.



INSIGHT: The effects of putting maternal efficiency first

Vaughn Farms, Forsyth, Ga., is a diversified family farming partnership currently managing 275 commercial Angus cows in a low-input, total-forage program. T. Butler Vaughn, after dispersing his dairy in the mid-1950s, purchased several groups of closely related registered Angus females. The registrations were discontinued in the late 1960s. James, his son, joined the operation in the early '80s.

The Vaughns never succumbed to the temptations of incorporating the exotic breeds into their program. The elder Butler watched his neighbors mongrelize their herds and witnessed their continual plight of having to address the numerous problems associated with the Third-World breeds. He maintained that his 4-frame-score, 1,000-pound (lb.) Angus cows were more efficient and profitable. Three moderate-sized cows could be run on the same resources where his neighbors were running two.

Reproductive regularity has been the primary selection and culling criteria utilized by the Vaughns. If a cow weaned a marketable calf every year, she was allowed to stay in the herd. A trip through the Vaughn pastures will reveal quite a few gray-muzzled cows older than 15 that are still producing. They saw no economic benefit from culling cows strictly on age; furthermore they discovered maternal efficiency begets maternal efficiency.

Over the years Vaughn Farms employed numerous marketing options

for their calves and yearlings. In recent years, when selling through order buyers on the farm, they found their calves always brought a premium over market and often sold to the same buyer. Their attempts at collecting feedlot and carcass information on the cattle they sold were unsuccessful.

Two years ago, during the depressed cattle market, they made the decision to retain ownership on a portion of their steer calves and to gather feedlot and carcass data. The cattle were fed through the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity under the direction of Darrell Busby, area Extension livestock specialist in southwest Iowa.

The results confirmed their suspicions. Their cattle performed at a profitable margin in the feedlot and were exceptional in the cooler. That first group of 28 Angus steers yielded 96% Choice with a *Certified Angus Beef™* acceptance rate of 55%. Vaughn Farms has since seen their *Certified Angus Beef* acceptance rate increase to greater than 65% on more than 130 head of steers.

It would appear their selection for maternal efficiency did not create problems with carcass merit.