

Maxey Farms

BIF commercial cattlemen of the year rely on Angus genetics.



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Story & photos by
JANET MAYER

At Maxey Farms in Chatham, Va., both Henry Maxey and his son Hank agree that developing and maintaining a productive cow herd is no easy task. Making that cow herd functional and economically productive year after year is an even greater challenge.

They have been successful in their initial objective of adding numbers and straightening out their herd’s breeding seasons, but they say they have yet to meet all their goals.

“Our goal is to get the cow that works in our environment,” Hank says. A bonus, he adds, would be producing steers that gain 4 pounds (lb.) per day and convert feed to gain at a 4-to-1 ratio in the feedlot and that grade Prime, Yield Grade (YG) 1 on the rail.

“Our goal from the beginning has been to breed the cow that will have the best steak at the highest price that we can possibly get and grow it the cheapest,” Henry adds. “We aren’t to that level yet, but I think we are going to get there.”

Proof that they are traveling in the right direction, Maxey Farms was named the 2001 Commercial Producer for the Year by the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF).

The program

Fall is an extremely busy time at the 1,200-acre farm, where cattle and tobacco are the mainstays. Tobacco harvest coincides with the operation’s fall calving schedule. Their herd of 300 commercial females is synchronized and bred by artificial insemination (AI).

“Calving season is usually hectic, with the heifers calving over a 50-day period, and cows over a 75-day period,” Henry says, adding that last year about 85% of their calves were born in the first 30 days. “Once we got through the initial rush, it was great.”

Henry explains that they changed their synchronization strategy this year. They had been synchronizing heifers using Syncro-Mate B followed by two shots of Lutalyse and synchronizing mature cows with two shots of prostaglandin given 11 days apart. They switched to feeding melengestrol acetate (MGA) to the heifers with one shot of prostaglandin; mature cows got two shots of gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) and one shot of prostaglandin. All are bred in five days, then turned out with the clean-up bulls.”

This is a far cry from the years after the farm was bought in 1965. At that time Hen-

ry was working as an Extension agent specializing in farm management. His wife, Linda, was in charge of the herd of 75 commercial cattle that had been purchased to graze hilly terrain that was not tillable. The herd was primarily Angus cows bred by a couple of Gelbvieh bulls.

Later, Angus bulls were added to the mix, and replacement heifers were kept to build the herd after Hank returned to the family farm in 1990. Since that time, the herd has been bred exclusively to Angus sires, with about 25% of the cows still having Gelbvieh influence. The Maxeys chose to use Angus because they felt there was a better market for the breed in the East, and the cattle seemed to adapt well to the area. They also liked the fact that Angus cows were good mothers, without being extremely big, and they marbled better than the other breeds.

“I like the breed because no other breed has the database that Angus has available to aid in the selection of sires,” Hank adds. “We would use a hybrid, but there just is not the database to support that type of breeding program.”

Bull selection

When it is time to choose bulls, Hank is in charge. He chooses only proven bulls by using data from the *Angus Sire Evaluation Report*.

Their No. 1 objective is to get a live calf on the ground, Hank says. “The set of cattle we have now has three or four generations of calving ease, 3.0 pounds and down. That being the case, he says he doesn’t think it would matter whether they used a bull with a birth weight EPD of 2.5 lb. or 0.0 lb. on the heifers.

“There is enough spread from birth to yearling growth on the bulls that we are basically using the same bulls for heifers as we do on the mature cow herd,” he adds.

The EPD criteria he puts into the online sire summary search are for bulls

- below 2.5 lb. on birth weight, but depending on the heifers, he may pull a bull in at a little lower than that;
- at least 30-35 lb. of weaning weight;
- greater than 15 lb. of milk, but not much more than 24 lb. or there are problems getting the cows to breed back;
- positive for scrotal circumference;
- not more than 0.5 in. of yearling height, as cows’ being too big for the environment is another deterrent to their breeding back; and
- as much yearling weight as he can get.

“On the carcass EPDs, we switched to ultrasound carcass data this year as much as we could,” Hank says, adding the some of the proven bulls don’t have that data yet. He says

he looks for above-average ribeye area and percent retail product.

"On the fat EPD, I feel it is kind of up in the air. We know we need those calves to put flesh on to breed back, so we don't really look at that real hard," Hank says, adding they would just as soon have a bull that had positive EPDs for both retail product and fat, as long as it wasn't too much fat. "We do like to have as much ribeye as possible in them to offset the fat EPD, because you will get a positive retail product."

Before carcass EPDs were available, Hank was choosing bulls for production reasons. Fortunately, in the end, they turned out to have good carcass numbers also.

For many years the operation has used bulls from bull tests for cleanup. Basically



Maxey Farms was named the 2001 Commercial Producer for the Year by the Beef Improvement Federation. Pictured are (from left) Hank, Linda and Henry Maxey. "We've had a lot of help getting to where we are today," Hank says, acknowledging assistance from people at Virginia Tech, the Virginia Cattlemen's Association, the Extension service, Select Sires, and their seedstock suppliers.



Tobacco is one of the mainstays of the operation owned by Hank Maxey and his father, Henry. Tobacco is grown on about 20% of the operation's 1,200 acres.

they use the sons of the same sires they use for breeding by AI. They do so by scanning the *Angus Sire Evaluation Report* every year to find the bulls that meet their criteria. They then try to find sons of those bulls, sometimes through local seedstock producers. They often buy from Sheldon Angus, just down the road from them, who they say shares the same breeding philosophies and provides good customer service.

The Maxeys say they would like to buy from Western producers, but they are hesitant because they fear these bulls might not adapt well to the fescue grass in their area of southern Virginia.

Evaluating progress

In order to get carcass data back on their herd, the Maxeys sold 114 steers, taken right off the cows, to a feeder in Illinois in 1995. Hank recalls it was the year that corn was about \$5/bushel (bu.), so it wasn't a particularly good year to be feeding cattle.

The Maxeys did get performance and carcass data back on the calves, which were harvested at 14 months of age. The calves posted gains of 3.09 lb./day, with 80% grading Choice and an average YG of 2.8.

"We felt the cattle did well at that time and when we got the data back, we made no changes," Hank says. "We kept using the highly proven bulls that met our production standards and had a certain level of carcass data, and continued doing what we have been doing since 1990."

The operation also has put cattle through the Virginia ROP (retained ownership program). However, the Maxeys say they hate to make a judgment call based on the results, since it involves just a few head of cattle.

"We have had a hard time retaining ownership in the last five or six years," Hank says. As high as the feeder calf market was this year, with buyers coming in from Ohio and Pennsylvania and paying a pretty good premium on the cattle, a breakeven analysis indicated more chance to profit by selling as calves. The option of feeding the calves out offered too much risk for the return.

Most of the calves from the operation are sold through the Virginia Cattlemen's Asso-

ciation Tele-Auction Program. They are prepared according to the Virginia Quality Assurance Program health guidelines. A grader comes to the farm to grade the cattle prior to the sale, giving an estimated weight and grade for a contemporary grouping. The cattle, still on the farm, are sold over the phone by the truckload all over the country. The auction has a roster of 500 buyers who receive a list of cattle prior to the sale.

"We calved last year in the fall during September, October and November, and we sold on August 7 of this year," Henry says. "We had a trailerload and a half of steers with the full load averaging about 720 pounds and the half load about 600 pounds. Our average of all our steers was 675 pounds. We haven't changed our birth weight EPDs any, but our weaning weights have gone from about 550 to 650 pounds."

Refining the herd

The Maxeys have sold a few of their commercial heifers by private treaty during the last five years, but most have been retained to build the herd. In fact, Henry points out that about 70% of their cows are less than 7 years old, although there are several cows in the herd that are 17-18 years old. If a cow can raise a calf that is not in the bottom 5% of the group, she stays.

Each year, about 5% of the cows are culled based on calf production, but about 90% of the culling at this point is due to reproductive failure. As the Maxeys tighten the breeding season more in the future, they predict they will probably cull more severely if the cows don't breed in the right time period or if they lose their calves.

"What is not fescue adaptable hits the road also," Hank adds. "A lot of cattlemen don't like fescue because you have some problems, like reduced gains, but instead of changing what grass we can grow the cheapest, we try to cull the cattle to get the cattle that can work on the grass we grow. That has been Daddy's philosophy, and it's mine, too."

Being named BIF's commercial producer of the year would indicate they are traveling in the right direction.



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