

Blake Robertson (right) works in tandem with father-in-law Virgil Ast (left). The families operate separate herds with similar goals and common genetics from cost-shared bulls. Ast calves in the spring, Robertson in the fall.



# LEVERAGING KNOWN GENETICS

## Missouri cattlemen capitalize on retained ownership opportunities.

Story & photos by Nicole Lane Erceg, Certified Angus Beef LLC

It's been more than a decade since Blake Robertson marketed his calves through a sale barn.

Retained ownership may seem like risky business, but Robertson knew enough to gain the confidence to find out more. After years of selling and then watching others reap the benefits of his Angus genetics, he was curious about the data and the impact they could have on his own profitability.

"We felt it was time to see what we really had and what we needed to make improvements on to move forward," he says.

The young cattleman bought his first Angus heifers while still in college and today runs a commercial herd of 150 near Nevada, Mo.

Working in tandem with father-in-law Virgil Ast, the families operate separate herds with similar goals and common genetics

from cost-shared bulls. Ast calves in the spring, Robertson in the fall.

It was Ast who motivated his son-in-law to retain ownership after he made the change in 2014 and found the data promising. He remembers being surprised to see his calves grade 100% Choice or better. It inspired Robertson to go down that discovery road.

"In my heart, I knew we had good cattle," Robertson says. "I was nervous, but at the same time, there's always room for improvement, and that's what we try to focus on each year."

Every year, he says, it gets better.

Today the herds are purebred Angus, but it wasn't always that way. When Ast moved to Missouri in the 1970s, he had Herefords and a Longhorn bull. He transitioned

to Limousin and experimented with crossing Maine Anjou, Simmental and Angus before a full transition to The Business Breed.

### Changing with the times

"Everything changes so fast," Ast says. "We're always keeping an eye out for something different to elevate our herd."

It's a mantra Robertson applies to his own operation.

"If you're not staying ahead, I fear you're going to get left behind," he says.

They apply the philosophy to selecting new genetics.

The majority of their bull battery hails from nearby Hinkle's Prime Cut Angus Genetics, with Gardiner progeny from Kansas sprinkled in. The pair hold the bar

high on expected progeny differences (EPDs), setting a floor of \$150 (preferably \$160 for Robertson) for beef value (\$B) selection index while analyzing EPDs for calving ease (CE) on heifer bulls and watching ribeye area, marbling and growth. They look at past carcass data on bloodlines and make each decision,

They turn genetics quickly, each bull lasting just a few breedings, and retain replacement heifers from each calf crop. The oldest cow in Robertson's herd is 6.





including animal temperament, with the end in mind.

“I pay attention to docility on the bulls,” says Ast. “These animals are so easy to work with, and I think that makes the carcass better when you don’t have overexcited cattle.”

They turn genetics quickly, each bull lasting just a few breedings, and retain replacement heifers from each calf crop. The oldest cow in Robertson’s herd is 6.

“We’ve had good success, and every time we see a carcass data sheet, I want it to be better than the last,” Robertson says. “By updating genetics and keeping everything current, that’s the best way to make it possible.”

Data aren’t something Robertson sits at the computer and just analyzes; it’s ingrained into his decision-making. Even if it were not a round number, he’d know the last load’s rate of gain — 4 pounds per day — and that’s something he’s pleased with.

### Putting data into action

While the industry average has risen to more than 70% Choice, 6% Prime and 30% *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand acceptance (for Angus cattle), recent loads for Ast have tallied 100% Choice or better with 60% CAB, including

“We decided we were doing the basics at home and wanted to see how they perform so we can get a better idea of what we can do to get better ourselves,” adds Ast.



20% Prime without yield grade (YG) 4s or 5s. Robertson had similar success with recent calves earning 94% Choice or better with 68% CAB, one-third of those Prime.

They put the data into selection practice on the maternal side of their herds, too.

“Last year on a set of steers, I had two calves that were Select,” Robertson says. “I no longer have those cows. I want the set of calves we’re getting ready to ship to be better than the set before.”

It’s an aggressive, forward-facing mind-set, focused on improvement and profitability. It works for Robertson and Ast.

“From what I’ve seen, the only way you’re making money right now feeding cattle is with the premiums these cattle have for their quality,” Robertson says. “We feel targeting quality like the *Certified Angus Beef* brand helps earn premiums, and that’s what pays the bills and drives our bottom line.”

They say their key to success has been finding mentors, friends and business partners to help guide the way and data to learn from as they come.

### Preparing for the feedyard

Robertson watches each calf with a careful eye, recording weights at

weaning and recording thoughts as they go through the chute. He does the same when he works them again for their booster vaccine, tracking the process and taking into account both genetic and environmental factors.

If the winter season was mild or harsh, or if the weather fluctuated that year, he records it to capture the reasons why each animal is performing well or not performing to expectations.

Calves are creep-fed using Purina Accuration<sup>®</sup>, and

maintain that diet postweaning with prairie hay and mineral before the truck ride west.

While in the finishing phase, Robertson and Ast don’t take their eye off the investment. They feed at Hy-Plains Feedyard,

Montezuma, Kan., and visit frequently — sometimes as often as six times a year.

“We like to see how they perform in different stages, what they look like, and learn what the [Hy-Plains staff] are seeing and thinking going forward,” Robertson says.

“We decided we were doing the basics at home and wanted to see how they perform so we can get a better idea of what we can do to get better ourselves,” adds Ast.

The feeding partnership has all dedicated to seeing the cattle realize their genetic potential, so that both consumer and producer win.

“We want to produce the best product possible, and hopefully it will generate more consumer interest in beef. We work to have a better product to put across the plate,” says Robertson. █

Editor’s note: Nicole Lane Erceg is assistant director of communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC.



# 61<sup>st</sup> Tifton

## Bull Evaluation

### Selling 85 Top-notch Performance Tested Bulls

Angus • Charolais • Hereford • Red Angus • SimAngus • Simmental

# March 6, 2019

Wednesday | 12:30 pm | Irwinville, GA

UGA Beef Team  
229-386-3214 • Jacobs@uga.edu

Georgia Cattlemen’s Association  
478-474-6560

Sale books available online at [ugabeef.com](http://ugabeef.com) | Videos available two weeks prior to sale.