



THE ANGUS LINK

Don't make a mountain out of a mole hill

As you are receiving this issue of the Angus Beef Bulletin, we are in the midst of a busy bull-sale season in a large portion of the country. Spring 2000 breeding decisions are being made by seedstock producers who will produce the bulls you will purchase in 2002.

The decisions that you, as a commercial cow-calf producer, make now will most likely be producing beef that will be consumed two to three years from now, and these decisions can affect the maternal makeup of your program for many, many years to come.

Bull-purchasing decisions may not seem as simple as in the past. The information, performance data, expected progeny differences (EPDs) and measurements to which we have access in making bull-purchasing decisions may seem quite overwhelming to some. I have many times heard this statement by both commercial and registered breeders: "It is hard to find a bull to buy. There aren't many out there that do everything right. There are so many traits defined that it just eliminates all the possibilities."

But it IS easier

It is true. There is a world of information out there for a potential buyer to evaluate. At the American Angus Association, through the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program, we currently provide EPDs on 13 traits. Combine that with actual performance data and measurements, ratios, ultrasound data and possibly the production history on some ancestors, and a buyer may have 30 to 40 different pieces of information to consider when purchasing a bull.

But that's good! Having the opportunity to analyze and select from these various pieces of information is what allows a producer to specifically improve a program with the Angus seedstock selected.

The trap we all fall into, the one we have to avoid, is trying to find the bull that excels in every trait. We still are all in search of the perfect animal. He probably is not out there yet.

An interesting exercise is to look at the average EPDs on the current sires used in the breed and to see how many bulls can meet or exceed these averages on all 13 traits. In the Spring 2000 Sire Evaluation Report, the average EPDs for current sires are as follows:

Birth weight	+2.8
Weaning weight	+31
Milk	+14
Yearling weight	+57
Yearling height	+0.06
Carcass weight	+7
Marbling	+0.08
Ribeye area	+0.15
Fat thickness	+0.00
Percent retail product	+0.1
Mature weight	+20
Mature height	+1.1
Scrotal circumference	+0.10

When you plug these averages as minimum criteria into the Angus sire-evaluation sort, there are only nine bulls from the 2,508 listed in the main report that meet or exceed the average for all 13 EPDs. Of the 2,212 bulls in the young-sire supplement, only seven bulls meet these criteria.

So you can see, when we select on multiple traits, we greatly reduce the number of bulls available, even setting our EPD levels at breed average. Think how we narrow the choices by increasing that pressure to look at only the top 5% or the top 10% of several traits.

Setting priorities

The answer: Look at your program, set some priorities and balance the selection pressure to make the most improvement possible on the traits for which you feel you need the most improvement.

For example, if you sell your calves at weaning and keep no replacements, selecting for weaning growth would be essential. On the other hand, if you retain ownership on your calves through the feedlot phase and have been disappointed on yield grades, concentrate on ribeye area, fat thickness and percent retail product.

It is all a matter of balance and setting priorities. Fortunately, the Angus breed has a large, diverse genetic base. When combined with the beef industry's largest performance database, this gives the user of Angus bulls the opportunity to identify and to use bulls that are balanced and capable of making predictable improvement in many traits at one time.

Use EPDs as they were intended

This is where the mountain comes into view.

EPDs are exactly what their name implies – expected progeny differences. EPDs are a genetic-prediction tool developed to assist producers in decision-making that will improve their programs. EPDs also have become a widely used merchandising tool to describe and to help assign value to animals – sometimes to the extreme. Sometimes we make huge mountains out of little differences.

One example I remember vividly occurred when I attended a bull sale a few years ago. As a general rule of thumb, many people looking for bulls to which to breed heifers would use a +2.0 birth weight EPD as an upper limit. At bull sales we attended there was excellent demand for the bulls with birth weight EPDs under +2.0.

In the same sale, basically the same bull, bred the same way, with an acceptable actual birth weight, but a +2.1 birth weight EPD, might sell at a \$500-\$1,000 discount to comparable contemporaries. This ever-so-slight difference, which represented essentially no genetic difference in the bull's breeding potential, was being greatly overexaggerated as reflected by the value given these bulls.

Study and understand what are acceptable and usable EPD levels for a particular trait. Again we will use birth weight as a simple, easy-to-understand example. Assume you are looking for a high-growth bull superior in carcass merit to use on a set of mature cows. Realize that a low birth weight EPD is not necessary with this scenario, and that looking at bulls with higher expected birth weights will allow you to select from many more potential sires.

Some practical tips

A few things to keep in mind as you embark on your bull-selection venture:

- Look at the data, use the data, but don't let the massive amount of information overwhelm you.
- Don't get caught up in eliminating bulls because they don't rank in the top 1% of the breed in every trait.
- Set priorities in your selection for the traits in which you want the most and the quickest improvement.

Superior genetics can be found in many places. The widespread use of proven bulls

and performance evaluation across the breed has increased the consistency of Angus bulls available to the commercial industry.

If you have questions or need advice, visit with your seedstock supplier or contact the Association through the regional manager in your area or through our office in Saint Joseph.



Check out the Association's Bull Listing Service (BLS). BLS is a program of the Commercial Relations Department and can be found on the Association's home page at www.angus.org. Just click on the quick link located on the left of the screen.

A 90-day listing includes the bull's name, birth date, expected progeny differences (EPDs), sire and maternal grandsire, as well as ranch information. The service allows buyers to search for bulls by EPDs, sire groups or state.

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