

Bruce Rushton's Angus-based commercial herd produces quality replacement heifers for his own operation, as well as the Saluda County Cattlemen's Replacement Heifer Sale.



Heifer sale hits the mark for longevity, capturing value with reputation for intensely screened consignments.

by Becky Mills, field editor

Ag economists will tell you longevity is a major factor in profitability when it comes to mama cows. The same could be said for heifer sales. Going into its 28th year, the annual Saluda County Cattlemen's Replacement Heifer Sale has it covered.

"Our whole purpose is to provide customers with quality heifers they can buy with confidence," says Travis Mitchell. "That takes consistency."

The reason for the long run is pretty darn easy to spot, says the Clemson University area livestock and forages agent. "We have dedicated consignors with outstanding herds of commercial beef cattle. They understand the

importance of good genetics and nutrition."

Saluda cattleman Bruce Rushton agrees. Mitchell, with help from other area extension folks, provides the official screening for the sale, which includes quality, disposition and health requirements. But, the producers take it a step further.

"We screen ourselves. We have a standard we've set. We've fought for quality," Rushton emphasizes.

"It is a good opportunity to compare your heifers to others," he notes. "When we have a new consignor, we see a big improvement between year one and years two and three."

High bar

"Iron sharpens iron," says Ridge Spring purebred and commercial producer Kevin Yon. "It is an unwritten code. Producers bring their very best."

Yon, who's been consigning heifers since 1997, gives much of the credit to former county agent Phil Perry, who retired in 2013.

"Phil was the major cheerleader and coordinator," he explains.

"Somehow, he got some of the highest-quality heifers, the ones producers would normally keep for themselves. The bar was set high."

The quality extended far beyond the sale heifers, Yon says. "Phil saw it as a total management system.

All year long he encouraged producers to manage their cattle, their genetics, their nutrition and their herd health program."

Lydia Yon, Kevin's wife and partner in Yon Family Farms, agrees.

"Buyers get the total package," she says. "The Saluda heifer sale has become the go-to sale in the Southeast for people to get heifers with the genetics, nutrition and herd health they need to be successful."

The working relationship between Perry, followed by Mitchell and the producers, has been a key factor, Kevin adds. "It has been a wonderful partnership."

Lydia adds, "There has been ongoing producer education. There are programs from weed control to

bull selection available. Producers have a plethora of opportunities to learn, and they've taken advantage of it."



Saluda, S.C., cattleman Bruce Rushton says the Saluda County Cattlemen's Replacement Heifer Sale draws buyers from across the Southeast.

**Capturing
VALUE**

Group mindset

Perry continues to give the credit to the producers who put the knowledge to work and, in turn, mentor other producers.

“You can have the greatest programs in the world, but this way people can see the progress,” he observes.

Producers make sure quality is passed to their buyers, including times when there may be a glitch.

“Things go wrong,” says Kevin. “They always do. But the producers have gone beyond what was expected of them to make it right. They’ve stood behind their heifers.”

Team effort

Along with the quality factor, members of the Saluda County Cattlemen’s Association have a solid history of working together, a mantra repeated by Phil Perry. When the sale first started, it was hosted at a county arena, which was primarily a show barn.

Kevin shares, “The producers had to bring every panel they could scrounge up and put them up. They’d bring flatbed trailers for people to sit on.”

For the last 15 years, the sale, hosted the fourth Saturday in February, has been at the Saluda Livestock Market. However, it still takes a group effort.

“We go down the Wednesday before and blow off the dust,” says Rushton.

His wife, Karen, adds, “We make sure every farm is represented when it comes to work.”

“They give the barn a spring cleaning,” says Kevin. “They spruce it up, change the light bulbs and put down fresh shavings.”

The Friday before the sale, heifers are brought in and weighed. The open heifers are preg-checked (bred heifers are typically scanned by ultrasound on the farm), and penned by consignor, two to five to

a pen. Consignors also decorate the pens with farm signs, provide information on their heifers, and even put out baskets of candy.

In turn, Lydia says, “The sale barn has been very gracious to let us have the sale there.”

Not only do the 25-30 consignors work, the whole community, and beyond, pitches in. Local veterinarians provide low-cost preg-checking. Shavings are donated. Larry Olson, retired Clemson extension beef cattle specialist, helps with the sale book. The Saluda 4-H cooks hamburgers. Then there is the clean-up and



Kevin and Lydia Yon consign commercial heifers to the Saluda County Cattlemen’s Replacement Heifer Sale to support their bull customers.

loading out of heifers after the sale.

Says Rushton, “There are people there on sale day helping who never consign a heifer.”

Reaping the reward

Along with the satisfaction of working with their fellow producers, consignors are rewarded financially. While there have been years when down cattle markets have put a damper on heifer prices, the group has seen average prices for commercial bred heifers go as high as \$2,350, and averages for open heifers as high as \$1,860. This past February, 116 bred heifers averaged \$1,277; 67 open heifers averaged \$1,078.

Says Kevin, “Phil Perry always said a quality product for a premium price.”

There is a ripple effect from the premium prices, Perry adds. “It encourages producers to buy better and better bulls, or use AI (artificial insemination) and

tighten up their calving seasons.”

In turn, there’s the advantage of collective advertising and marketing to show off the heifers.

“The sale really draws a crowd,” says Rushton. “These heifers go to herds all across the Southeast, and many return year after year.”

A consignor since 1996, the Saluda producer says it has helped his replacement heifer market.

“At least at first, I didn’t have the name to draw buyers to my farm,” he says. “We feel we get a lot more money having an auction. When you have two people wanting your heifers, it helps a lot.”

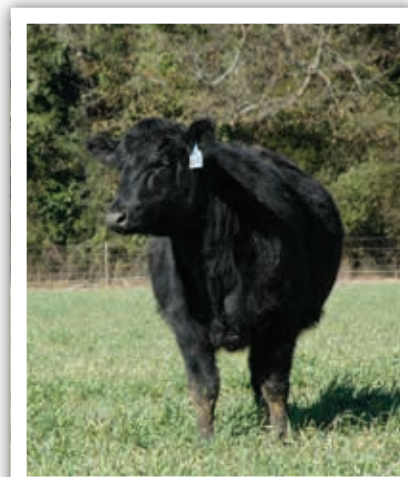
The addition of bred heifers in 2010 has also bumped up the price and demand, as more buyers have gone from spring to fall calving.

Rushton adds, “It cuts down on people bringing them back because they won’t breed, too.”

Because they do so much of their own labor, sale expenses are minimal, averaging around 3%-6% per head. Besides advertising costs and the auctioneer’s commission, 1% goes back to the Saluda County Cattlemen’s

Association, where it helps fund two to four scholarships a year.

“The last five years a consignor



Yon Family Farms consigns top-quality replacement heifers to the Saluda County Cattlemen’s Replacement Heifer Sale.

donated a heifer and the money went to the 4-H and FFA,” Kevin adds.

The quality, camaraderie and marketing strength have built a loyal following. Although some of the founding participants have passed away, the next generation has taken their place.

“Most sales of any kind don’t last forever,” notes Rushton. “We’ve had all kinds of weather — sleet, rain, tornadoes, but the sale goes on. We’ve been blessed.”

Head cheerleader Phil Perry simply states, “It has been successful, very successful.”

Editor’s note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlegirl from Cuthbert, Ga.

Angus have marketing power

When the Saluda County Replacement Heifer Sale started in 1993, there were quite a few heifers sired by the exotic breeds. No more. Whether it is the heifers or their preconditioned steer mates sold in separate but equally successful sales in August and November, they’re not only Angus-sired, but mostly Angus themselves.

“We’ve blackened up Saluda County with these sales,” says Bruce Rushton. A former dairyman, he now has a 170-head Angus-based commercial herd.

It is a matter of economics, says purebred and commercial producer Lydia Yon. “Buyers are willing to pay more for Angus cattle.”

Her husband, Kevin, agrees. “It is a win-win situation. Whether producers are taking heifers home for mama cows or sending steers to the feedlot, Angus pays.”

