

“If It Ain’t Broke ...”

Story by
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Wes Williamson is a firm believer in the old adage, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” After using Angus bulls for the past 20 years at his family’s commercial cattle operation in Okeechobee, Fla., he is convinced the breed is at the forefront of the industry. Even though new beef breeds advertised as the salvation of the beef industry come along every year, he has found most fall short of that goal.

“I have followed the fad of trying a few of these breeds, and I have been disappointed,” he says. “I consider the Angus breed the premier breed in the world as far as maternal characteristics and carcass characteristics. No matter what new breed comes along or what different way there is of doing something, I figure, let somebody else test it.” While Williamson tries to stay informed of new things happening in the industry, he says he becomes more cautious every year.

Williamson and his father, Frank, run a commercial cattle operation, cross-breeding Angus and Brangus cattle. Bought in the 1940s by Frank’s father, the 9,000-acre south-Florida ranch is also used to grow citrus, leaving about 6,000 acres for the herd of 2,400 cows. A second ranch in west-central Alabama consists of 1,000 acres, 500 of which are under water for the cultivation of catfish.

Selection pressure

Williamson says he puts a lot of selection pressure into the eight to 10 Angus bulls he buys each year. He looks in the *Sire Evaluation Report* for high-accuracy bulls that fit the ranch’s program; then he tries to locate that bull and a group of half-brothers. He credits the excellent sire summary put out by the American Angus Association and the expected progeny differences (EPDs) for easing bull-buying decisions.

He primarily looks for bulls with plenty of milk and adequate weaning weights, but he also looks for good carcass EPDs. About seven years ago he added positive marbling and ribeye scores to his bull-se-



Wes Williamson, Okeechobee, Fla., purchases eight to 10 Angus bulls each year for use on his 2,400-cow herd. (PHOTOS BY JANET MAYER)

lection criteria. That change eliminated about 90% of the bulls in the Angus sire summary, since the heavy-muscled cattle are usually the poorest marbling, says Williamson.

“It was more difficult five years ago to find a bull that met the criteria I laid out, but today you see a lot of breeders [who] are emphasizing these characteristics,” he says. Williamson says he’s been purchasing Angus bulls out of Montana for the past eight years, basically from three breeders — Van Dyke Angus, Stevenson/Basin and Jolly Roger Angus.

“I found a bull last year at Jolly Roger that just fit the characteristics I look for and that had extremely high accuracy,” says Williamson. “I got about 10 half-brothers out of that bull, and it was unbelievable how well those bulls worked on our Brangus cows. They produced excellent calves.”

Bulls purchased in Montana take a roundabout route to the Florida ranch, stopping first at the Alabama ranch. During the year they stay at the Alabama ranch, they are used to breed yearling heifers, which also gives them necessary time to adapt to what is a substantial variation in climate.

Williamson reasons that bringing the

bulls by way of Alabama in February doesn’t stress the animals as much as would taking them straight to the subtropical climate at the Florida ranch. Since the bulls aren’t used for breeding in Alabama until fall, they have plenty of time to adapt to the climatic change, and they reportedly do well when they finally arrive in Florida the following year.

Female pressures

In addition to putting a lot of selection pressure on the bulls bought for the operation, Williamson puts equal pressure on heifers from the herd.

“The ranch in Alabama isn’t a cow-calf operation,” he explains. “Instead we winter and breed about 60% of our Florida yearling heifers that are chosen on appearance, size and feminine characteristics. They are exposed to the bulls for two months, and we then choose replacement heifers from those that are bred, which puts more selection pressure on them. The group that is not bred is exposed to the bulls for another 60 days.” Out of that group, those that are bred are sold at various sales. Those that did not breed are sent to the feedlot.

The operation strives to calve the mature cow herd Nov. 15 through January.

Breeding is done by natural service for a 90-day period with a conception rate of 93%. Cows that don't calve and wean a calf every year are sold.

Complementarity

The Angus and Brangus breeds have been used exclusively for the last 20 years because the Williamsons have found they work best in the environment.

"When we tried a few Beefmaster bulls a few years back, it didn't work out because the breed was too large," Williamson says. "Over the years, I have found the most efficient cow for our subtropical environment is one that is no larger than 1,050 to 1,150 pounds as larger cows. One that is 1,200 to 1,400 pounds will not wean as much beef per hundred pounds of cow."

Williamson, who travels to the Alabama ranch about once a month, says the 15-year-old catfish business meshes well with the cattle because the two facets put different seasonal demands on employees, equipment and feed. During the summer months, equipment and help are

busy feeding the fish. In the winter the fish go semi-dormant during the time the heifer operation is the most critical.

The operation also leases an additional 400 acres of land and has grazing contracts with farmers in Alabama and Mississippi where Williamson heifers are fed through winter on a cost-per-gain basis.

Steers and the bottom 40% of the heifer calves are sold through satellite video sales several times a year with calves grouped by breed and age. Williamson uses a Lotus® computer program to plug in the price of grain for the period when cattle will be in the feedlot and plugs in the futures price to determine a breakeven price of what the cattle should bring. If they don't bring that price, the operation retains ownership and puts them in the feedlot. They have fed cattle eight of the last 10 years.

Tools to improve

In his efforts to breed better cattle, Williamson has gathered both carcass and performance data on the cattle for quite a number of years. He has used this

information to improve the operation's breeding program and has set goals to raise more beef per acre, without environmentally affecting waterways and wetlands. He hopes to do this by having, not a larger cow, but a more efficient cow that will wean a higher percentage of her body weight in calves.

As for his thoughts on what the goals should be for the cattle industry as a whole, he says, "I think one of the worst problems confronting the cattle industry today is the fact that we are working with 80 to 100 different breeds of beef cattle. How can we have a consistent end product when we have that many? You don't see the pork or poultry industry with that many breeds and, therefore, they both provide a very consistent product.

"When people go to buy beef, let's face it, they are rolling the dice. ... It would be nice if we would select five breeds that would really contribute something to beef and neuter the rest. We would be money ahead."

