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# The Prime Directive

**Tory Borell is willing to give up a few cents on yield grade to capture the Prime premium.**

Story & photos by  
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After years of increasing consumer focus, most beef producers have come to agree they should include carcass traits in genetic selection. That falls far short of the Borell Ranch position. "We have always selected for carcass

traits, and everything else came along with it," says Tory Borell, Dighton, Kan.

He points to one pasture of 14-year-old commercial Angus cows, saying, "We hope to get a lot of heifers out of them this year and then let them go; some of them aren't as efficient as they used to be." Still, heifers backed by that kind of



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longevity should work in any herd. All the more so when that herd has produced the highest grading and dollar premium load ever sold through U.S. Premium Beef (USPB). Those old cows remained because all of their calves have graded Prime, Borell says.

The Borell name is closely linked with record-setting Angus quality in this area of western Kansas, where Tory's father, Ron, and his uncle George started with Canadian Colossal daughters in the 1960s. They have used Gardiner Angus genetics to build cow families that have been extended with bulls from Fansher Angus Ranch, Garden City, Kan., for the last 12 years.

Borell bought his first cows from his uncle in 1982 and now manages some 400 family cows, all exclusively from registered stock. Most recently, Borell achieved the highest-value pen of Angus steers fed in a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) feedlot in the 2002 Best of the Breed (BoB) contest. Sam Hands, manager of Triangle H Grain & Cattle Co., Garden City, which also feeds for Fansher, picked up Borell's \$3,000 check from CAB President Jim Riemann at the BoB awards proceedings in Nashville, Tenn., last winter.

Borell was pleased, but not ecstatic.

"We only had 75% CAB and Prime," he says with disappointment. "We thought we could win the whole BoB contest, but those cattle were held up at a family feedlot before moving to Sam's to finish, and they went backward for a few days."

Most producers would be more than satisfied with those results, but you have to consider recent Borell cattle grades. The record-setting USPB load of 35 would have been 100% CAB, including an amazing 88% Prime, except for three yield grade (YG) 4s. The load returned a \$150.55-per-head total premium on market day in November 2000. His father said it then, and Borell repeats it still: "Our goal is to sell a load of 100% Prime."

Over the last three years, they have had a load of 37 grade 84% Prime. Still, their overall consistency may be more impressive than their progress toward the ideal. Out of 508 head in 15 lots over three years, Borell cattle averaged 79% CAB or Prime and earned a \$102.10-per-head premium with USPB. Their bottom 25% returned a \$62.65-per-head premium and achieved more than 37% Prime — and most of the cattle spent fewer than 90 days on a finishing ration.

Angus producers rightly aim to put more muscle in the package, but it's instructive to note the Borell

cattle get nearly all of their premiums from the quality-grade component. Those 508 head carried a YG 4 discount of \$5.02 per head, but that was more than countered by a \$9.87-per-head premium for the excellent dressing yield of 64.26%.

The real money was made with marbling. Three years' worth of Borell calf production garnered an average quality-grade premium of \$98.75 per head. In that record load of 88% Prime cattle, the quality-grade portion was \$147.85, against a YG 4 discount of a half penny per pound, or \$4.42 per head. Valued on the BoB contest grid, all 508 head would have ranked near the top.

## Cow foundation

The cows must forage in short-grass range pastures without any special care. "We run a low-budget operation," Borell says with infectious laughter from behind the wheel of his vintage International Scout. "When something works, we stick with it, like this old truck — when we take the top off every summer it is easy to count cattle."

If the count comes up short, more than likely a few cows wandered up one of the chalk canyons along Walnut Creek, which provide the mixed blessing of winter shelter and occasional snow-catching hazard. Just out of high school, Borell lost several cows in

such a crevasse during a 1987 blizzard. Most years, though, the breaks save calves. "Over the last 10 years, I'm sure there have been 20 calves born up that ditch," he says, pointing out a 50-foot deep cut.

Heifers calve in a corral and calves are individually identified.

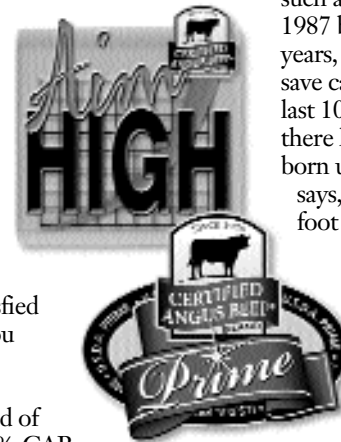
Cows calve in pastures in the spring, identified

only at the grass-time vaccination roundups with color-coded ear tags to mark the sire groups.

"We look closely at the information from the packinghouse, and it says our cows are excellent carcass producers," Borell says. "If we don't like what we see, we won't go back to those bulls again."

Brad Fansher credits the "good foundation the Borells have built up over the years" and selection that has included buying full-brother bulls. "When you work with known quality on both sides, versus unknown genetics, they have demonstrated what can be achieved," he says. "Ron always watched those pedigrees and tried to match them up."

Borell gives his father and uncle full credit for that foundation, but he says visual appraisal and continuous



proof in the progeny keep it on track. “If you don’t have a good, deep-loined cow, you don’t have anything. You can have a pedigree or a list of data as long as your arm, but if you can’t get that good beef out of her calf, it’s a waste of time and money.”

He knows about the opposite arguments. “I’ve heard it said lots of times that you can’t have good cows *and* good carcasses. But it’s making our payments,” he says. “As long as the steers of that quality are gaining weight, the extra is going to make you money plus your premium.”

### Postweaning performance

Most of the steers are finished by 18 months of age. “We don’t usually push them,” Borell says. But the option is available. “Ten years ago we weaned some at 675 pounds, fed them for 200 days and sold them at 14 months weighing 1,260 pounds, for \$80 per hundredweight (cwt.) on the hoof.”

The Borells finished a couple of loads at home this year and a couple more loads were sold to fit cash flow needs, but Borell is looking into entering a pen in the 2004 National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC), only available at CAB-licensed partner feedlots.

One challenge is finding an ideal transfer weight. After weaning, calves work up to a ration of one-third grain and two-thirds silage with a half pound of protein such as cottonseed meal. Steers usually get at least one zeranol (Ralgro®) implant. Borell attributes part of the excellent carcass record to hand-feeding that allows cutting back on only the silage portion to make ration volume adjustments. “I’m going to try to get them to at least 900 pounds here,” he says.

Aspiring to the heights of carcass quality has been an effective route to building value in the herd. “I always wanted to produce the best beef I could,” Borell says simply. “I used to think shooting for carcass traits, the cow could get too big, but we judge the bulls accordingly, and that has not been a problem.”

Hands, of Triangle H, sees a bright future for Angus cattle with bred-in potential for top quality.

“We’ve had cattle with less than 100 days on feed make 90% Choice,” he says. “But marginal cattle drop out pretty fast. You can select for carcass and select for growth, and you just demand the reproduction. If she doesn’t perform, she’s out.”

Borell feels more at ease in today’s quality-oriented beef industry.

“What makes the packer happy makes me happy,” he says. “For a lot of years that wasn’t true, when they went on the lean craze. Consumers didn’t like the way that beef tasted — I didn’t either. And I never understood why everybody thought the lean carcass was a target, when the only thing that got top dollar was Prime.”

**Table 1: Borell cattle harvested through U.S. Premium Beef, 2000-2003**

	All	Top load		All	Top load		All	Top load
<b>Head</b>	508	35	<b>% Prime</b>	51.76	88.41	<b>Quality, \$</b>	98.75	147.85
<b>Lots</b>	15	1	<b>% Choice and above</b>	95.16	100	<b>Dress, \$</b>	9.87	7.12
<b>Days on feed</b>	95	133	<b>% CAB*</b>	27.14	11.59	<b>Yield grade, \$</b>	(5.02)	(4.42)
<b>Carcass wt.</b>	823	830	<b>% FAB</b>	2.59	0.0	<b>Out wt., \$</b>	(1.50)	0.0
<b>Dressing %</b>	64.26	64.33	<b>% YG 1-3</b>	89.86	91.72	<b>Net premium, \$</b>	102.10	150.55
			<b>% YG 4</b>	10.14	8.28			

\*not including CAB Prime