



Billy Womack uses carcass data and EPDs to make selection decisions in his Ashford, Ala., Angus herd.

The Feedlot Search

Producers share their experiences in obtaining feedlot and carcass data.



After taking a do-it-yourself approach to carcass data collection, Billy Womack now leaves the job to others.

Story & photos by
BECKY MILLS

After years of taking a do-it-yourself approach to finishing his cattle and collecting carcass data, Billy Womack now lets others do the chores. For the past 10 years or so, the Ashford, Ala., producer has sent his steers to Auburn University's Pasture to Rail program and the University of Georgia's Beef Challenge.

"I think the state agriculture college is the best bet for anybody who wants to get information on his cattle," he states.

Womack's history of carcass collection began in 1964 with his father, the late Bill Womack. The two producers would take 12 or 13 of their finished Angus steers to Sunnyland Packing in nearby Dothan every Friday for six months out of the year. The younger Womack would trace the ribeyes himself. He continued the practice after his father died in 1972.

In 1980, though, Sunnyland closed. Womack started hauling his steers to a packer in Florida for harvest and data collection.

"When I first started sending them, they were paying 3¢ to 4¢

above the yellow sheet," he says. "After three or four years, that dropped back to 5¢ or 6¢ below the yellow sheet. It looked like a lot of trouble for not much money."

Next, Womack entered his steers in Auburn's Pasture to Rail program, and the steers went to a Kansas feedlot for finishing and data collection.

"That was OK. I didn't have a problem with it," he recalls. Then Auburn switched to another Kansas feedyard that sorts and markets the steers primarily on backfat thickness. "When they hit 0.35 or 0.4 inches of backfat, they were gone," he recalls. "Some of my steers sold after 40 days. There were a bunch of Selects."

Womack then asked Raleigh Wilkerson, the former commodities director for the Alabama Farmers Federation (ALFA), to help him find a program. Wilkerson suggested the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity in southwest Iowa. That's the same group of feeders that the Georgia Beef Challenge uses for feeding and data collection, so Womack began sending his steers with the Georgia calves.

"I've been going through the Georgia program for four or five years now," he says. "It has been very satisfactory. They've got good people on the ground down here, and Darrell Busby [Iowa State University (ISU) Extension livestock specialist] seems to do a super job of keeping up with everything up there."

"He's like the ALFA representative," Womack continues. "He goes from feedlot to feedlot, and he knows what to look for. If I went up and looked, I'd probably pick the wrong one."

He adds, "All those years at Sunnyland, either my father or I got the information. In Florida we

Putting the numbers to work

Bruce Layne has no problem figuring out how to use the carcass data he received when he fed his steers at Central Iowa Feeders.

"We had a \$250 difference in two steers with only a 60-pound difference in weight," he says. "The mother of the inferior animal needs to go to McDonalds." The Fountain Run, Ky., cattleman adds, "A Select steer at the bottom brought \$832, and a Choice steer at the top brought \$1,431. That is a \$600 difference.

"There is no one right way to do this business, but there are 1,000 ways to do it wrong," he comments. "We need to eliminate those wrongs. The cows that produce the light animals, the least-profitable animals, eat the same amount as the ones that produce the good ones."

He emphasizes, "This eliminates the guesswork and unknowns."

"The value of it is we're getting information," says Billy Womack. The Ashford, Ala., producer enters his steers in the University of Georgia's Beef Challenge each year. The steers are sent to Iowa's Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity for feeding and harvest. In return, he gets a complete set of carcass data on every steer.

"You can make decisions about what will help you in the future or what won't help you," he says.

He apparently is already making good decisions. When the closeout sheets from the 38 steers he sent to the 2002-2003 Beef Challenge came back, Womack found all 38 graded at least low-Choice. "Fourteen out of the 39 went CAB (*Certified Angus Beef*®)," he reports. "Two went Prime."

The carcass data from the feedlot steers isn't the only data he uses in his selection decisions. He ultrasounds his home-raised yearling bulls before he either sells them or uses them in his herd.

"Ultrasound is a great thing. More progress has been made in the three or four years we've started using it," he says. "But ultrasound is like EPDs (expected progeny differences). It is a good guess. When you get your cattle up there and find out what they actually did, it is hard evidence.

"This pays off. You can figure out a lot of things if you get ultrasound data and feedback from the feedlot."



missed it a few times. But when you've got somebody like Busby, it is going to get done. I imagine it helps that the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) folks follow them through."

On top of the traditional carcass data, University of Georgia Extension Animal Science Research Coordinator Patsie Cannon requests that CAB data be collected for Womack's cattle so he can send it in to the American Angus Association.

What feels right

Fountain Run, Ky., producer Bruce Layne went with his gut instinct to pick a feedlot — site unseen. "Olin Cox came to Kentucky and spoke at a meeting three or four years ago. I didn't even get to go, but one of my neighbors told me about him," Layne said.

After several phone conversations, the Glidden, Iowa, feeder visited Layne's operation. "I trusted him completely. He seemed like a man of character," Layne says. "He assured me I would get the information, and I had no reservations about putting my cattle in his hands."

Layne was especially impressed when Cox showed up to help load his 22 head of black-baldie and Hereford steers last July. "I was afraid he thought I was a bad cowboy, but he wanted to check out the trucker," he comments.

"We had zero problems with sickness," Layne adds. "Olin told me what vaccines he wanted them to have."

Layne's cattle were harvested in November and December, and it has been a profitable learning experience.

"We sell through the GeneNet grid and get individual carcass data back," Cox reports. "The premiums we got by selling through GeneNet more than paid for the carcass data collection."

Layne adds, "Olin is going to bring the feedlot and carcass information and go over it with a fine-tooth comb. He wants to make sure I understand all the expenses." Layne says this is a completely different experience from his first try at getting feedlot and carcass data. In 2002 he sold his steers to an alliance and was promised he'd get the data back. He didn't get any.

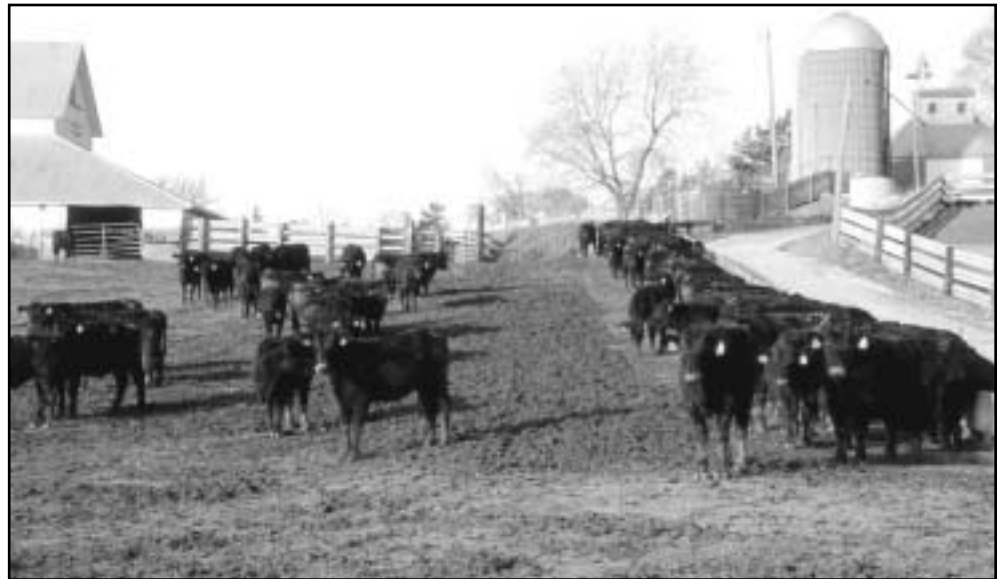
But Layne is already looking forward to next year's report. Due to health problems in his family, Cox is temporarily closing his feedlot but selected Wehrs Feedlot in Nebraska for Layne's cattle. He will work with the Wehrs to make sure Layne still gets complete feedlot and carcass data.

"We are breeding our black-baldie heifers to Angus bulls. It will be interesting to see how the Angus will grade and yield compared to the

half-Angus, half-Herefords," Layne says.

For more information on the Georgia Beef Challenge, contact Patsie Cannon, Research Coordinator, Extension Animal Science, University of Georgia, PO Box 1209, Tifton, GA 31793; (229) 386-3683; fax: (229) 391-2517; ptcannon@uga.edu.

For more information on the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity, contact Darrell Busby, Field Specialist/Livestock Beef, ISU Armstrong Extension Center, 53020 Hitchcock Ave., Lewis, IA 51544; (712) 769-2600; fax: (712) 769-2610; dbusby@iastate.edu.



Many states have feed-out programs so producers can send five to 10 head and get feedlot and carcass data back on their cattle.

Decisions, decisions

It takes more than a little faith to entrust your cattle and your dollars to a feeder, especially when you're counting on getting carcass data in return. But Paul Dykstra, feedlot specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB), says the search doesn't have to be overwhelming.

"The simplest thing to do is look at the list of licensed CAB feedlots," says the Manhattan, Kan., specialist. "These feeders have shown a desire to feed more Angus and Angus-cross cattle, as well as a desire to return feedlot and carcass data to the producer."

From the minute a person walks in the feedlot office door, everything should indicate the feedlot is customer-oriented and committed to information flow, Dykstra says. "Ask the feedlot manager or customer-service representative to walk through some of the information and prices that are available. Does the feedlot have a person who is solely dedicated to handling the feedback of information? Does the manager or operator have the time and willingness to do that type of thing?"

Dykstra encourages producers to find out the percentage of cattle fed that belong to a retained owner or that are targeted for information feedback. That could serve as an indication of whether the feedlot is comfortable with providing information.

"It sure never hurts to get some references from current and past customers," he adds. "Reputation and word of mouth are a pretty big thing in the feeding sector and tend to be true over time."

Like Dykstra, University of Georgia animal scientist Robert Stewart also suggests taking a look at the feedlot's numbers. "Get an example closeout

sheet with the information that's available. Find out about the fee structure — the yardage and cost of gain."

Stewart also recommends asking about the mortality and morbidity rates for the last year. "Ask how they determine when the cattle are ready for harvest. How many sorts and pulls can they offer for any one pen? Do they offer any forward-pricing service?"

He says to find out who the feedlot contracts with to collect carcass information. "That's usually where the ball is dropped," he notes. "How do they handle lost identities? Have there been any loads where the carcass data has been missed?" Still, he emphasizes the same trait as Dykstra — communication. "Getting the best estimates on costs and profitability is important, but ultimately, you are not going to be happy unless you find a feeder you can communicate with. It is not much different from finding an auto mechanic or an insurance broker."

Stewart, who helped search for feedlots to handle the Georgia Beef Challenge, says, "If I am looking for someone to really get carcass data for me, some of the smaller family feeders would probably work better. That's been the root of our success with the Tri-County group. That, and communication."

For more information on CAB-licensed feedlots, contact Dykstra at the CAB Supply Development Division, 1107 Hylton Heights Rd., Manhattan, KS 66502; (785) 539-0123; fax: (785) 539-2883; pdykstra@certifiedangusbeef.com. The Web site for CAB also has a list of licensed feedlots at www.certifiedangusbeef.com.



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