

AI Pays Its Way



Brother duo utilizes AI on commercial Angus herd.

Story & photos by
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There are those who say artificial insemination (AI) is not worth the time or money for a commercial herd. Phil and Jim Ham beg to differ.

Check out this comparison of AI-sired calves next to those sired by the cleanup bulls in the Ham's first-calf heifers: The steers sired by AI bulls weighed 98 pounds (lb.) more at weaning than the steers sired by cleanup bulls. It is the same scenario with the heifers. Those sired by AI bulls weighed 93 lb. more than those sired by cleanup bulls.

"So to me, AI is free," Phil states.

The Forsyth, Ga., brothers started their Angus-cross herd's conversion to AI 11 years ago. "We were tired

of pulling calves," Phil recalls. Three years ago they started AI-breeding the second-calf cows. Then, the year before last, they bred their two herds of mature cows by AI.

The Hams are sold on the practice, and so is John Pope, Monroe County Extension educator. He reports, "They were ahead of last year on heifer weights, and this was a dry year."

"The AI calves are born earlier in the year, and they grow faster," Phil says.

AI protocol

When the Hams are prepping their heifers for AI season, which begins Jan. 1, they follow the recommendations of University of Georgia veterinarian Mel Pence

and take pelvic measurements and reproductive tract scores. Then they can cull heifers with the potential for calving difficulties and those with immature reproductive tracts. They also supplement their winter pastures with free-choice access to hay and corn gluten to keep the heifers in at least a body condition score (BCS) 5, on a scale of 1 (emaciated) to 10 (obese).

The Hams start their heifer AI program by heat-checking for 36 hours and breeding any heifer that is in heat. Then they don't synchronize a heifer that is ready to breed anyway. To synchronize, they use a version of the Select Synch protocol with the addition of a CIDR,[®] an intrauterine device that secretes progesterone.

On Day 0, they give an injection of gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) and insert the CIDR. On Day 7, they remove the CIDR, give an injection of prostaglandin and apply a heat-detection patch. Then, they check heat and breed any heifer that shows heat for five days. Fourteen days later, they put on another heat-detection patch and watch heat and breed for 10 more days, then turn in the cleanup bulls.

Soul-searching

If you'd like to follow the Hams' example with an artificial insemination (AI) breeding program, they say you should ask yourself the following questions.

- *Are you a detail person?* "If you don't pay attention to details, you aren't going to be successful with AI," Phil Ham states.
- *Do you have your cattle in a body condition score (BCS) of at least 5?* "If not, you're wasting your time," Phil says. "That goes with putting the bull in there, too."
- *Do you have access to a good technician?* The Hams definitely do. In addition to



Phil Ham

It is hard to argue with the Hams' results. In their 2006 breeding season, they put a straw of semen in 90% of their 290 cows and heifers. "Over 75% of our heifers settled to AI," Phil says. "On the second-calf heifers and the mature cows, we settled 56% on the worst herd and 72% on the best."



Jim Ham

“That way we get two shots at AI with the heifers,” Phil explains.

They follow the same protocol with their cows but only breed them once by AI. They put the bulls with them 14 days after they finish heat-checking and breeding. Bulls come out of the heifer and mature cow pastures after a 75-day breeding season.

Virginia Tech reproductive physiologist Bill Beal favors the use of the Select Synch plus CIDR protocol. “It is a great treatment, the best method out there,” he states. “It maximizes getting heifers pregnant.”

He recommends tweaking the Hams’ version, though, to cut down on labor and get even more heifers bred AI. “The 36-hour heat check on the front end is adding labor. The GnRH administered when they put the CIDRs in will take care of those that are just about to come into heat.”

He also suggests giving GnRH and time-breeding the heifers that don’t show heat within 84 hours after removing the CIDRs. “You’ve already put the money in them, and about 30% of them will get pregnant.”

In addition, he says the Hams could sanitize the CIDRs, then re-use them to resynchronize the heifers by putting them back in on Day 13 after the initial AI, pulling them out on Day 20, then checking heat and breeding for two to three days. “The CIDRs will resynchronize the heifers that aren’t pregnant but won’t abort the ones that are pregnant.”

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Peas in a pod

While AI does mean extra labor for the Hams, it also means they can set their sights high when it comes to bull

selection. They start with high-accuracy, easy-calving bulls for both their heifers and their mature cows.

“We might go with a higher-birth-weight bull for the cows, but we primarily use the same bulls for uniformity,” Phil says. “We try to make the calves look like peas in a pod.”

“We also look at energy values, the cow’s ability to hold her flesh. We want a

moderate-framed cow that will wean a calf that will sell that fall at 750 to 800 pounds.”

The Hams get gains of around 2.63 lb. per day during the preconditioning period with pasture, free-choice hay and corn gluten.

“We look at balanced traits, no negatives,” Phil continues. “We’re not looking for the highest yearling weight, but moderation. We’d rather have a bull be

good at everything than great at a couple of things.”

Obviously, buyers agree with the Hams’ selection criteria. In the Monroe County Heifer Evaluation and Reproductive Development (HERD) sale, the Hams’ bred heifers averaged \$1,428. In the HERD program the heifers are developed

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doing the AI on their own herd, Phil also does the AI for the 300 heifers enrolled in the Monroe County Heifer Evaluation and Reproductive Development HERD program.

● *Do you have good facilities?* You need them because “you’re catching cattle at least three times in a very short period,” Phil says.

● *Do your cattle have a good disposition?* “If you have cattle that throw up their heads, you don’t need to AI,” Phil says.

Jim Ham adds, “It all depends on what you want. If you’re just piddling with cows, then don’t AI. If you’re trying to make a living with them, you better AI.”

AI Pays its Way for Georgia Herd *(from page 119)*

and evaluated on the farm, and bred to the same Angus AI sire.

The Hams' steers are no slouches, either. Thanks to help from their ABS representative, Bobby Freeman, the truckload lots of steers have buyers waiting. While the steers would sell on quality alone, Freeman helps the Hams get them certified through a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Process Verified Program (PVP). This means they have had timely vaccinations, given correctly, and are age- and source-verified. In addition, the steers are also eligible for all-natural programs since they have had no implants, no ionophores, no antibiotics, and no exposure to meat-and-bone meal.

This year the steers went to Heartland Feeders in Nebraska. When they are finished, the Angus-sired black steers will go to Creekstone, while the Angus-sired off-color cattle will go to Montana Legend Natural Angus Beef.

Freeman says marketing help is available to all ABS customers who either can market in truckload lots or combine with another producer in the area to make a truckload.

"We help put the buyers who are looking for this type of cattle with the sellers," he says.

The marketing program is the finishing touch for the Hams' AI efforts. "We're getting paid for the added value of the cattle now," Phil says. "We used to run a couple of dollars under the basis, and now we're running a couple of dollars over."

Angus through and through

The Sleepy Creek Farm herd looks just a bit different than it did in 1967. Phil and Jim Ham's uncle took the 10- and 7-year-old boys to the sale barn and bought them a Guernsey steer and a Brown Swiss steer. Their father then decided they both needed a heifer and added two Charolais-Holstein-cross females to their herd.

The Forsyth, Ga., herd got another infusion of color in 1984 when they bought 160 Beefmaster-cross cows. Now, the 290-cow herd is 85%-90% Angus.

"When I came in '89, there was a lot of debate in the community about going to Angus," recalls John Pope, Monroe County Extension educator. "The Hams were one of the first to take that leap."

John went with them on their first Angus-buying venture and helped them select the black bulls. "We haven't bought anything but Angus bulls since," Phil Ham says.

The dollar signs were convincing. "There was too much difference at the sale," Phil says, "12¢ to 14¢ between the Beefmasters and the Angus."

They also sent both Beefmaster steers and Angus steers to a Kansas feedlot with the Georgia Beef Challenge, the state feedout program. When they saw the feedlot and carcass data, there was no turning back.

Phil continues, "Our cattle are heavier now. We had a load go out last week (mid-October) pushing 800 pounds. They are 10 to 11 months old and were weaned in August. We used to have to stocker our

cattle to get them that big."

He adds, "The Angus Association has information on everything."

One of the biggest sellers for the breed is their calving ease. The brothers stick to high-accuracy, low-birth-weight sires and also cull any female that has to have help calving.

"Ten years ago it wasn't anything for us to pull 10 or 15 calves," Phil says. "We pulled one calf last year, and for two years before that we didn't pull any."

"The other thing I've seen in their herd is a tremendous change in disposition," Pope adds. "They also cull heavily on that."



Phil Ham (left) asked his county Extension educator, John Pope, to help him and his brother pick their first Angus bulls.