



High Caliber at the Bar B

Missouri Angus producer sets his sights on pleasing consumers profitably.

Story & photos by
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Since 1918, the Browning name has been synonymous with precision in hitting a target. The Browning Automatic Rifle, known as the BAR, revolutionized trench warfare after

World War I, and sportsmen later appreciated John Browning's Auto-5 shotgun.

Another Browning family took a different route to precision with the Bar B brand, aiming at a high-quality beef target. Randy Browning, Appleton City, Mo., says, "Cattle

have been in our family forever, great-grandparents and so on. When I was a kid, I remember the Polled Herefords."

Since 1996, he and wife Sharon have managed the family farm with son Carson and daughter Kayla. Before it was Browning's turn to call the shots, the herd evolved through crosses with Simmental and Braunvieh bulls. He credits the Continental breeds with contributing an adequate ribeye size to the genetic pool, but the second thing he did as manager 10 years ago was to buy registered Angus bulls.

The first thing he did was to check the targets. Browning set up computerized recordkeeping and contracted for individual harvest reports through the Texas-based Cattlemen's Carcass Data Service.

He had been using individual calf identification (ID) linked to both cow and bull ID for years, but the new influx of data brought precision to genetic selection. It also showed room for improvement in quality grade, and that pointed to a need for the Angus breed.

Browning wasn't interested in terminal crossing for the feedlot. "We wanted to build the herd with replacements — that's really the only path to making any headway," he says. "You can look all over the country, but most of what you find

will be somebody's culls. You don't know how they will fit in your herd. If you want to stay in the business and raise the best cattle, you have to keep your best heifers for replacements.

"I look at EPDs (expected progeny differences) on both the cow and bull side when I go to buy bulls," Browning says. "I want everything in the top 25% of the breed, but keep growth and frame size more moderate."

The commitment to precision and balance led to purchases from Gardiner Angus Ranch, Ashland, Kan., beginning in 1997, and then Hinkle's Prime Cut, Nevada, Mo., since 2001. Carcass data began to show a jump in quality grade in 2000 with the first wave of two-generation, Angus-sired calves.

"We fed at home for years and years, and only sent them away when we couldn't grow enough corn here," Browning says. More recently, all cropland has been seeded to fescue and calves are finished at the Irsik & Doll Feedyard (IDFY), Garden City, Kan.

No other single ranch source with 100 or more head at the 32,000-head feedlot had a higher combination of marbling and muscling last year than Browning,



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says IDFY manager Mark Sebranek.

That's saying a lot, because the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed partner is a repeat winner in 2006 of the CAB Quality Focus Award. It had the highest percentage of on-target cattle of all CAB feedlots with more than 15,000-head capacity, at 27.8% *Certified*

Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand acceptance and USDA Prime.

Last year's 119 Browning steers went 45% CAB and Prime with 97.5% Yield Grade (YG) 3 or leaner. The first 50 head this year were 100% Choice or better and 36% CAB. "And the cattle perform here, too," Sebranek says, reporting a 3.5-pound

(lb.) average daily gain (ADG).

"Randy has the ribeye in those cattle," he says, "and he keeps it there while adding everything else he needs. Ask him what he looks for in a bull, and he says, 'all of it.' Randy doesn't mark a lot of bulls in a catalog, but those are the only ones he will bid on," Sebranek says.

Even the best bulls could miss the mark in herd improvement without disciplined health, selection and heifer development programs. The targets are in line at the Bar B.

Year in review

Most of the herd is spring-calving, and chores in February and March include a first round of immunization shots to guard against bovine respiratory disease (BRD). "We calve the heifers separately, but at the same time as the cows," Browning says. "I feed them a little extra hay and grain as they are calving and through the first few weeks with the bulls."

Fescue pastures get about 35 lb. of nitrogen in late January and 25 lb. in late August, with additional phosphate when needed. "We may not have to feed hay until January," he comments.

Calves get creep feed starting in May. Booster vaccines in August give way to a fenceline weaning program that runs like September clockwork. "We put them all in a small pasture with creep feeders for a couple of days, then sort the cows off," Browning says. The fence is composed of two barbwire and two hotwires.

"The calves never miss a lick going to those feeders," he says. "Then we start getting them switched over to a corn, protein and hay mixture. The key is to keep them eating — eating cattle are healthy cattle."

Shortly after the stress-free weaning, Browning selects replacement heifers with cow family and carcass data in hand. They move into separate management while all calves step up gradually from 4 lb. of daily ration to as much as 10 lb. for steers by the time the 750-lb. animals go out to IDFY in late January.

Heifers must prove themselves in other ways, starting with cow family and uniformity. "My computer records show all the calves, weights and carcass data for each cow," Browning says. "If I see one consistently producing a Select calf, it's a pretty good idea she'll be gone. It won't matter which bull you put on her, because she won't work. People want to blame the bull for a poor showing in carcass data, but more times than not, it's the cow side.

"If you ever keep a heifer that was born weighing over 90 pounds, you're just asking for trouble," he adds. "We don't keep the biggest heifers or the smallest."



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—*Randy Browning*

Heifers are projected to gain 2 lb. per day, and Browning weighs them each at weaning and in January. If they don't at least come close to the 2-lb. daily gain and weigh about 700 lb., they're culled, he says. “Then we pelvic-measure and cull a few more because of small openings, but they are getting better over time. We have almost no calving problems.”

He backs off on the feed in late winter, and the April flush of high-quality grazing provides an ideal springboard for successful breeding. Like a magazine clip, the system loads improved genetics into the herd as all cows go to market by the time they are 8 years old.

Meanwhile, by May the steers are nearing their finishing and harvest date as 15-month-olds at IDFY. “The quicker we can get them rolled and get the money out of them, the better we like it,” Browning says.

But that means something different to him than most cattle producers. “A lot of people just want to sell pounds at the salebarn,” he says. “After that, they couldn't care less. The way I see it, we need to raise the best product for the consumer, so they will keep coming back.”

The potential to win new beef customers is another point. “We need to keep improving quality for those who don't know about beef, too,” Browning says. “They will go somewhere to eat or cook a steak and say, ‘Man, that is really good. Where'd you get that? That's what we are going to buy from now on.’”

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Hitting the target isn't automatic at the Bar B, but a keen sense of purpose and ability to use information helps adjust the sights to get better over time.



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