



Least-Cost Didn't Pay

Strategic AI turns junk herd into gold.

Story & photos by
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Dave Guenzi laughs a little bit as he describes his cow herd of years past.

"We got them a couple at a time from the sale barn, and not one of them under 10 years old when we bought them," the Sterling, Colo., stockman says. Genetics didn't seem to matter much because their main purpose was to utilize the cornstalks.

He can joke about his ad hoc purchases now, because it provides perspective on how far the livestock

enterprise has come in 15 years. Guenzi Farms Inc. — a partnership between Guenzi; his brother John; and their parents, Kenny and Eve — is still highly focused on sugar beets, corn and alfalfa. But the family now approaches their cow herd with the same attention and use of technology.

"After all these years of doing it, it's working out," he says. "It all comes down to the fact that we have a program we like, we've stuck to it and now it's getting shinier all the time."

That shimmer — harvest groups

reaching more than 40% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) acceptance and a reputation bred heifer program — comes from some good, old-fashioned polishing.

Logic to better genetics

"The cow herd was truly a janitorial crew," says Jay Hill, beef specialist with Select Sires. He began working for the Guenzi family while he was in college and helped initiate the upward climb with the introduction of artificial insemination (AI).

Calves have always been retained and fed at local feedlots, but the first heifers were kept back for breeding in 1995.

"With his corn farming background, genetics became very important to Dave," Hill says. The family moved forward in a price-conscious mode until a decade ago. "Dave came to me and said, 'This is stupid. The difference between a cheap bull and a good bull is \$10. The difference on the calves going out is \$100.'"

"That was the start of an extreme improvement," he says.

One AI bull is chosen and used on the cow herd for the next three years. The result is extreme uniformity and ability to make directional change.

"Udders and disposition are the

first two things that have to be in place," Hill says. "Then we look at our kill data and try to single-trait select in the ones we're most lacking in."

First up was calving ease and growth. When they were established,

Guenzi set his sights on marbling. Recent yield grade (YG) troubles caused a switch to include more ribeye.

"If you start looking at too many traits, trying to push them all at the same time, you can really make no progress in any

trait," Hill says. "We're able to find what the profit-limiters are and then, within the framework of balanced cattle, we'll go after the highest-IMF (intramuscular fat) bull or highest-ribeye bull we can."

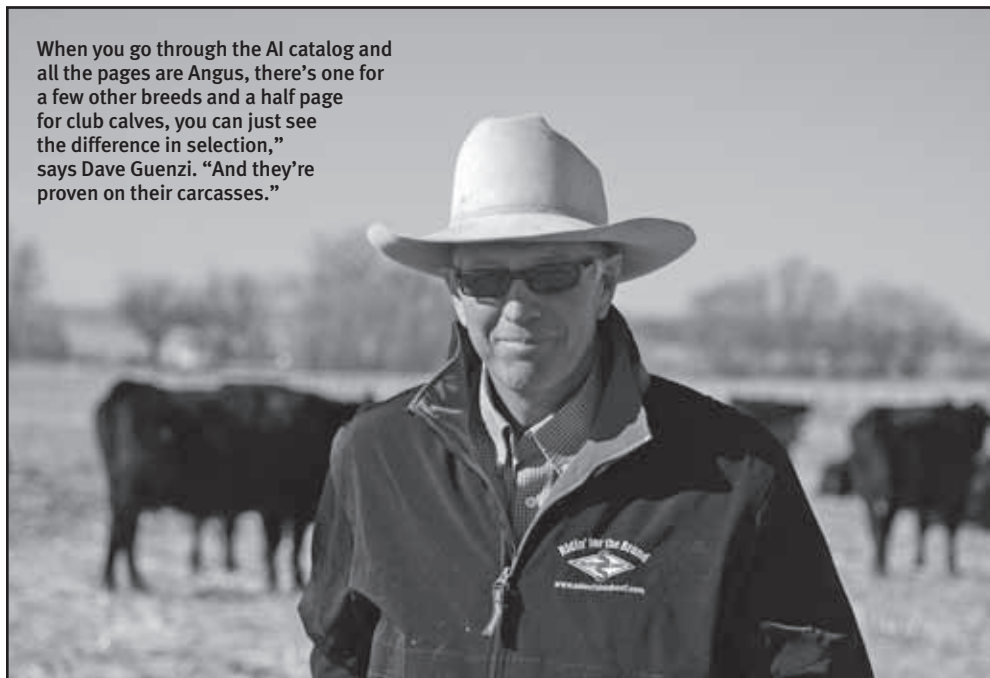
Data benchmarks

Steer calves and the bottom end of the heifers either go down the road to local McEndaffer Feedlot or to Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Chappell Feedlot in the Nebraska Panhandle. The returned data serves as a benchmark for future breeding decisions.

"We've never finished our calves at home because that's not our area of expertise," Guenzi says. "The feedlots do a good job for us."

Results show they have been steadily improving. In 2005, 125 head fed at Chappell made 34.3% CAB.

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“With his corn farming background, genetics became very important to Dave,” says Jay Hill, beef specialist with Select Sires. Hill helped Guenzi improve the genetics of his cow herd through AI.

Five years later, the average was up 5 points, and some lots went nearly 40%.

That change has come in tandem with increased performance.

“Fifteen years ago Dave got word that his cattle gained 2.2 lb. per day, and he was ecstatic,” Hill says. Now they consistently see better than 4 pounds (lb.) average daily gain.

But the fed cattle are only part of the picture, virtually the byproduct of predictable females that have become a significant piece of Guenzi’s business.

“That came about because we needed to build our herd,” he says. “We wanted to grow it, plus we wanted to make it a good herd. We decided that was worth something to somebody else, too, and it was another part of being diversified.”

Home-raised heifers are joined by purchased females, but not from the sale barn anymore. Instead Guenzi looks to “sister herds” with whom Hill puts him in contact.

“We utilize only customers who have had a long-term AI program and are using similar genetics to what the Guenzis are doing,” Hill says. “This year, five of the ranches used the same single bull on their cows and the same bulls on their heifers, so they’re all producing half-brothers and -sisters.”

Several ranches have been repeat suppliers.

“I really like the fact that I know a lot more about those cattle,” Guenzi says.

He’ll buy an entire draft and employ the same management he does with his own. A portion of the heifers and their steer mates are grown on cornstalks and grass before heading to the feedlot. The rest are mixed with his ranch heifers, which get two chances to breed AI. Angus genetics are the obvious choice.

“You’ve got such a good selection of top animals,” he says. “When you go through the AI catalog and all the pages are Angus, there’s one for a few other breeds and a half page for club calves, you can just see the difference in selection. And they’re proven on their carcasses.”

At August preg-checking, the opens are sorted off and put on feed.

“Dave basically has cattle in the feedlot year-round to spread the risk, but the neat thing with good cattle is that there just isn’t that much risk,” Hill says.

Each year the amount of unknown

decreases because they learn more about the cattle.

“There’s a pretty good flow of information, both directions, all the time,” Hill says. “When I talk to the sister ranches I can tell them how their cattle did on feed and where they need to focus, too.”

With all this change, there is one goal that hasn’t budged: Cows still add value to the crops. Cattle graze cornstalks until

April 15, when they’re either moved to irrigated grass, wheat pasture or drylot until they can go on grazing-association grass June 1.

Supplemental feed and weaning rations are easy to come by. The cow herd keeps farm employees busy in the off-season and helps spread out investments in equipment. They truck all their own cattle, for example.

“Those are some of the benefits of a diverse operation,” Guenzi says.

Cows no longer enter the herd when they’re 10; rather, they’re automatically culled at that age in an effort to keep the genetics fresh. That reflects a lesson learned: Least-cost doesn’t always mean the most return.

