

Genetics + Groceries =

Well-planned and executed commercial program brings home the premiums.

Story & photos by
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If you want to stump Mike Duke, ask him what is more important in getting his commercial Angus calves to qualify for the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand. He'll eventually rank bull selection first, heifer selection second and nutrition third. But then he'll say, "I could just as easily swap them around. They are all that important."

No matter what the order, he and his father/partner, Lewie, have the right ingredients. In 2010 and 2011, their Stockdale Farms averaged 36% and 38% CAB with 87% and 91% hitting Choice or higher.

The Munford, Ala., cattlemen officially began their CAB quest three years ago when they started feeding at Cattleman's Choice Feedyard Inc., Gage, Okla. However, their cattle operation began in 1949 with Mike's grandmother and her 10 head of dairy cows.

"We went through Charolais, Simmental, Brangus, Hereford and Santa Gertrudis," says Mike. "I hope through the years we've kept the best of those breeds."

Just a trace, though. For the last 10 years they've used only Angus bulls on their 460 head of mama cows.

The senior Duke is in charge of selecting and buying the sires.

"We went heavy on the marbling and carcass traits when we first started, but now want a good safe medium," Lewie says. He starts with birth weight.

"We don't want more than a 3.0



Mike Duke says creep-feeding makes weaning easier on the calves.

birth weight EPD (expected progeny difference) for our mature cows and 2.0 for our first-calf heifers." On \$B, he won't take anything less than a 65, although he says they have bulls on up into the 80s. He also looks at the bull's structure. "We want a good general appearance, some spring to their back legs."

Bill Rishel, North Platte, Neb., was one of their early mentors and bull suppliers. They also depend on Hinkle's Prime Cut Angus in

Missouri and Gardiner Angus Ranch in Kansas for sires.

"We bring in the genetics to breed superior cattle," says Mike.

For now at least, those genetics are strictly Angus.

"There may be a time when we need to go back to another breed," Mike says. "But the Angus breeders have done an excellent job of providing us with a large pool of genetics. When everything is working as well as it is, it makes it hard to change." He adds, "We've really seen a difference in the thickness of the calves since we went to Angus."

Female selection

Lewie is also in charge of selecting the original pool of replacement heifers; then Mike makes the final selections.

"Picking heifers isn't as hard as it was a few years ago," says Lewie. "We have a lot more to choose from. Mike has done an excellent job keeping records that go back several generations. It really helps in knowing where to cull."

Mike says, "I go through the records and put the feedlot and carcass data back with the mama cows. I find the ones that produce

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— Mike Duke

Prime and CAB. We're trying harder to go back to Prime."

He adds, "We marketed 250 calves this past year. One went Select. That calf's mama had already been culled."

While Mike says they have been paying attention to carcass traits for 10 years, he also emphasizes they use a combination of traits to select or cull females.

"I know from growing corn, if you breed for ear only, you wreck disease resistance," he says. "Anytime you stack all those genes on one thing, you wreck something else."

Seek and ye shall find

While the Dukes are conscientious about supplying their cows and calves with the needed nutrition to do their jobs, they were just as conscientious about finding the right feedyard. They had been retaining ownership for four or five years when they went with Cattleman's Choice.

"At some of the feedyards I couldn't get my carcass data back," says Mike Duke. "I got a list of feedyards where I could do that. They gave us references of people that had fed with them. We made phone calls and talked to those farmers, then picked out a feedyard from talking to them."

Their list of criteria included being a CAB-licensed yard.

"We had begun moving to using all Angus sires," Mike says. "Bill Rishel came down here and looked at our cattle and said we were missing out. He knew they would grade."

CAB®

“It is a complete package,” he adds. “We cull on weaning weight, if they are not docile, bad udders, if they aborted or are open.”

He says they are making progress. “We began 15 years ago culling on low weaning weights. Now we’re not having to do that,” Mike explains. “The calves are so uniform we may only cull 1%.”

Making the most of genetics

Farming has also taught the Dukes that crops have to have the inputs to make the most of their superior genetics. That is one of the reasons their calves have access to creep feed, then supplement, from the time they are 3 weeks old until they get on the truck to northwest Oklahoma.

The creep feeders are filled with a mix of corn, dried distillers’ grain and soy hull pellets. They also have free-choice Bermuda or ryegrass hay and, thanks to creep gates, they have access to ryegrass grazing.

“We’re trying to target a 2.9-pound (lb.) weight per day of age (WDA) for the heifers and 3.2-lb. for the steers,” Mike says. “Creep-feeding, from what I’ve read, if started early and continued, does help the carcass traits.”

Ohio State University animal scientist Francis Fluharty agrees. “There is a positive correlation between creep-feeding and marbling if there is enough energy and protein in the creep feed. It is all based on the increase in performance with a higher-energy diet.”

Mike says there is another advantage to creep-feeding.

“It absolutely helps with weaning stress,” he says. “We may have some bawling for 24 hours after we wean, but the calves are more worried about eating

and drinking than where their mamas are.”

He says they only drylot them for three days, then move them to pasture where they continue to get the corn/distillers’ grain/soy-hull pellets on grass.

“That is not a lot of change from what they are used to,” he notes.

At weaning in March, the fall-born steers average 700 lb., while the heifers average 650 lb. By the time the Dukes ship

them to the feedyard in July, they weigh 850 lb. to 900 lb.

“If we have good ryegrass they may leave heavier than that,” says Mike. “If we have a wet May, we can have ryegrass until the first of July.”

The calves aren’t the only ones getting top-notch groceries.

“Three years ago we started feeding the cows a total mixed ration (TMR) of hay,

dried distillers’ grain and corn,” says Mike. “It is almost a dairy ration. Our business is producing milk to grow these calves. Something has to get them to 1,400 lb. by 14 months of age.”

The TMR is by no means a year-round thing, but it is used to fill grazing gaps in the dead of winter, as well as prepare

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Munford, Ala., cattleman Mike Duke says a total mixed ration keeps his cows milking and in good shape for rebreeding.



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the cows for the December, January and February breeding season. By the time that breeding season is over, the overseeded ryegrass is starting to come on strong and the cows go back to grazing.

Rather than lose or maintain their body condition in the winter, Mike says the TMR allows their cows to actually

flesh up a little. He says that plays a big role in getting them bred back. In addition, he says it has almost cut out their problems with weak calves at birth.

"If we can pick up the conception rate and the rate of live calves at birth by 5% each, we can pretty easily justify the dairy program we're on," he says. "Our calving rate was 96.8% this past season. That is for cows and heifers."

After putting the investment into getting the calves on the ground and gaining, the Dukes want to make sure they don't lose ground with sickness.

"We try to give them the first round of vaccinations when they are 3 months old, at the upper end of three months," says Mike. That includes Bovi Shield Gold® 5, a modified-live vaccine (MVL) for infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), parainfluenza-3 virus (PI3), bovine viral diarrhea (BVD) and bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV); and UltraBac 7 for blackleg. They also give an injectable dewormer, and implant and castrate the bull calves.

"At 130 days, we booster the Bovi Shield Gold 5, the blackleg, re-implant and deworm," Mike says.

Their postweaning vaccination program is still a work in progress.

"We're not totally happy with it," says Mike. "We've had some pulls at the feedyard, so the last two years we've been playing with it, trying to get it better." Currently they are giving a haemophilus-pasteurella combo shot four to six weeks before shipping and an injection of MultiMin, a vitamin.

Fluharty agrees that the Dukes are wise to try to prevent illness in the feedyard. The animal scientist says, "Both stress and illness can negatively impact both marbling and tenderness. Research has shown that lung lesions from pneumonia are correlated with tougher steaks."

The Dukes' attention to detail is appreciated at the feedyard. "They have worked hard on their genetics," says Jarred Shepherd, yard manager at Cattleman's Choice. "They are also doing a good job on nutrition and health. Those ranch practices are as important as the genetics."

Mike gives a great deal of the credit back to Cattleman's Choice, though.

"They are absolutely doing a good job on the management end," he says. "They have an excellent feeding program with dry feed. We're happy with it. In the 100 to 130 days they have our cattle, they contribute to the carcass quality as much as we do and as much as the sires and dams do."

Whoever gets the credit, Mike is happy with the outcome. In a 40-head lot harvested Dec. 1, 39 were Choice or higher. "They were 13 to 15 months old, weighed 1,425 to 1,450 pounds and averaged \$1,950 each," says Mike. "The returns were \$20 to \$150 a head for CAB [and other] premiums."