



GG Genetics Builds NACC Dynasty

Unwavering dedication to high-quality cattle earn rewards.

Story by
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From humble beginnings in western Iowa 20 years ago, Mason Fleenor of GG Genetics has always had the same goal: to raise the highest-quality beef cattle possible. No one can say he has wavered. Fleenor's fed cattle claimed the top value and grand champion pens at the National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC) in both 2003 and 2005.

NACC is an annual beef-value contest open to groups of at least 38 steers or heifers sired by registered Angus bulls and fed in Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlots. NACC was sponsored in 2005 by CAB, *Drivers* magazine, Merial SureHealth™, Farnam Co., Alltech and the American Angus Association's AngusSource™ program. It awarded more than \$30,000 to the best of the Angus breed, including \$5,000 to Fleenor for his pen of heifers.

He manages 460 registered Angus cattle with wife Diane and son Jimmy, selling more than 100 bulls a year. They also feed cattle purchased from bull customers in their CAB-licensed 1,000-head feedlot.

"We feed cattle that come from our genetics — calves sired from our bulls," Fleenor says. "Calves that perform consistently with high-value carcasses come from herds built on years of selection."

Fleenor began in the early 1980s with

Simmental cattle, but switched to Angus in 1986. Predictable Angus genetics have been the building blocks that he used to build a solid foundation for success.

Until recently, Fleenor called his operation "Generic Genetics," meant to denote a broad, general base where each cow was equally capable of consistent excellence. After winning the 2003 NACC with a pen of steers, however, he changed the name to GG Genetics because other connotations of "generic" were less than flattering.

He helps customers build the same kind of consistent excellence into their herds by stacking generations of predictable Angus, and he shakes his head when he hears the frequent advice to crossbreed.

"Some of the common thought in the industry today doesn't make sense," Fleenor says. "It costs the same amount of money to own and manage a commercial crossbred herd as it does a high-quality straightbred Angus herd, but the Angus calves bring a \$20 premium."

Knowing your cattle

The 2005 NACC champion cattle were a group of mostly replacement heifers that did not cycle or breed. "We only had 5% opens this year, where last year we had around 10%," Fleenor notes. "There were some real good heifers in that bunch, but when they don't breed you can't afford to keep them in a breeding herd."

He fed the heifers a high-quality, forage-based diet all winter, which he says

contributed to their success. "You have to know cattle to feed them right," Fleenor says.

One critical element to building a quality herd is culling cows that cost the producer money, he says. There may be only three or four cows out of 100 that don't meet overall herd standards, but those few can really sap profits.

Recalling one customer's herd, Fleenor says, "Every year there would be one or two Yield Grade (YG) 4s, and one was out of the same cow every year. That cow probably cost me a couple thousand dollars over five years."

He advises customers to retain replacement heifers from his bulls to add to the potential for high-quality carcass traits in their herds.

"We feed some calves that are 85% to 90% Choice from herds that always buy their replacements," Fleenor allows. "But they aren't 100% like a lot of the calves we get from dams with generations of carcass sires built into their pedigrees."

Keeping track

Obviously, Fleenor tracks numbers and results. From the start, he has included a focus on carcass traits and maintained detailed records on his herd as well as the customer calves he buys. *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)-acceptance rates have steadily improved, so 50% is now typical for Fleenor's feedlot. Why does the rest of the country struggle to keep up?

"CAB-acceptance rates across the country have been disappointing," he says, noting the 15.6% average last year. "But if you look at the top 20 bulls for usage, until about 2003 only three or four of them had good carcass numbers. Now, two-thirds of them could be considered carcass bulls. It takes a few years to filter into the cow herds, but it's coming."

Exposing calves to as little stress as possible is another factor that helps to build high-marbling results. Drought for six years in the western United States hurt CAB-acceptance rates, Fleenor says, because by weaning time, calves were already stunted.

"We saw it whenever we got in some customer cattle that had drought stress; it hurt the grade," he says. "For calves, marbling potential starts before they are even born, so drought-stressed cows can affect the grade very early on."

Fleenor works closely with several Angus ranches in Montana, where he conditions bulls for an annual sale. Weaned calves purchased from

customers are also conditioned there before they go on feed in his Iowa finishing yard.

Both grand champion pens featured cattle from longtime customer Pattiglenn Angus Ranch, Saint Ignatius, Mont. Owned by Patti and Glenn Murphy, the cattle there are descended from a few foundation heifers the Murphys retained for their conformation, disposition, performance and carcass merit, Fleenor says.

"If I were a commercial feedlot buying on Superior Livestock, I would look at closed herd progeny," he says. "I'd bet that the guys who keep back all of their females have better cattle because they understand the value in good genetics."

Raising the quality bar

Proven performance is a key ingredient in Fleenor's success. He uses only the highest-accuracy bulls for high marbling and other key traits in balance, which explains why his customers keep returning to buy bulls at the GG Genetics annual sale.

"Everybody raising Angus cattle thinks they are raising carcass cattle, but we have all the data on all our cows and their progeny," Fleenor says. Now those progeny — including steers in 2003 — are winning national awards.

Purebred producers should not be afraid to cull, he adds.

"By the time you sell a \$1,500 or \$1,600 bull, you'd make just as much on a \$1,200 steer because there is less time, advertising, feed and management involved," Fleenor says. "We would rather win the NACC with those steers."

Selecting quality cattle can be a problem for many breeders. "Most Angus breeders are continuing to raise the quality bar," he says, "but some of them have a problem with keeping too many bulls intact. Sometimes a guy just starting out can't accept that his \$2,500 heifer did not produce a worthy bull calf."

Seedstock breeders maintain high-quality standards in keeping with those of the CAB brand, Fleenor adds. Customers appreciate owning the best Angus cattle, just as consumers appreciate the world's best beef-eating experience.

"Once you get people on CAB, they don't want anything else. They know it costs more, but they want to get what they know is good," Fleenor says. "It is a mindset, too. People think, 'This isn't just steak; it's CAB.'"



PHOTOS BY LANCE ZIMMERMAN

"It costs the same amount of money to own and manage a commercial crossbred herd as it does a high-quality straightbred Angus herd, but the Angus calves bring a \$20 premium," says Mason Fleenor, owner of the 2005 NACC grand champion and top value pens.