

Setting the Bar



Whole-herd makeover pays for Georgia producer.

Story & photos by
BECKY MILLS

Ask Dennis Akins to describe his pre-2000 herd and he'll probably wince.

"They were out in the pasture, on their own," says the Brooklet, Ga., producer. "We didn't do any controlled breeding. We didn't wean or give them shots. We'd just get

them up and sell them."

The bulls with year-round breeding privileges were Hereford and Limousin and produced calves too big for the crossbred cows of sale barn ancestry. Pulling calves and losing them was a common thing.

Now, top-quality Angus bulls stay in with the 95 Angus-cross females for 90 days, except for the heifers. They begin their breeding season by being

synchronized and bred via artificial insemination (AI) before the bulls are turned in for cleanup duties. Cows and calves are on a comprehensive vaccination and deworming program. The calves are weaned and preconditioned, then grouped and sold with other calves from the same area for a healthy premium.

The motivation behind the whole-herd makeover was and is the South Georgia Cattle Marketing Association (SGCMA). "It was all around me," Akins says. "Chap and Lee Cromley and Chuck Lee (all producers and founders of the group) are all right here."

Even before the marketing association had been formed, Chap Cromley was using an aggressive management and marketing program for his cattle. Akins says, "When I compared my prices with Chap, he was getting more money for his calves than I was."

With that motivation, Akins signed up for the group's first sale. Luckily, he did have the minimum requirement of 20 calves, so he jumped in with a vaccination and preconditioning program. He was already banding the calves at birth, so they were castrated. To meet the rest of the SGCMA requirements, he dehorned the calves that needed it, dewormed them, and double-vaccinated to protect them against infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), bovine viral diarrhea (BVD), parainfluenza-3 virus (PI₃), bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV), leptospirosis (lepto), seven strains of clostridia, *Haemophilus somnus* and *Pasteurella haemolytica*.

He also weaned the calves the first of July and fed them a grain-based ration until the mid-August sale so they would meet the group's

minimum requirement of a 45-day preconditioning program.

After getting a taste of the \$5- to \$10-per-hundredweight (cwt.) premiums the group normally enjoys over single-animal sale-barn prices, Akins was convinced.

The next order of business was tightening up his breeding season by building a bull pen. Now bulls are out with the cows from Jan. 1 to the end of March.

"If your cattle aren't where the rest of the group is weightwise, you're out there on your own," Akins comments.

Expert advice

University of Georgia Extension livestock economist Curt Lacy agrees. He labels the move to a controlled breeding and calving season as the No. 1 way to increase prices, increase production and decrease costs in a cow-calf operation.

"When a calf crop is strung out over nine to 12 months, weights are not uniform and calves have to be sold individually," Lacy says. "However, when calves are uniform in weight, they can be marketed in larger lots. Research has shown that lot sizes as small as five to 10 head can generate considerably higher prices (\$2-\$5 per cwt.) than calves marketed individually."

It also boosts production. "By shortening the calving season to 60 to 90 days," Lacy explains, "weaning weights will automatically increase due to fewer very light calves that bring average weaning weights down."

Lacy says a controlled breeding season decreases costs by allowing producers to feed heifers and/or lactating cows separately, process calves and work cows more efficiently.

In addition to tightening up his breeding season, Akins fired his bulls and asked Jim Collins, formerly his



A grant from the Georgia Grazing Lands Conservation Coalition helped Dennis Akins build the fence needed to separate and supplement his first- and second-calf heifers from the mature cows.

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After an AI breeding, Akins' yearling heifers are turned in with a cleanup bull. Akins is now only saving AI-sired heifers for replacements.



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county Extension educator and now the executive vice president of the Georgia Cattlemen's Association, to help him choose different bulls.

"Jim steered me toward Angus bulls and encouraged me to look at the best."

Akins didn't stop there. Following the lead of the other producers in the SGCMA, as well as veterinarian Ben Nessmith, he started pregnancy-checking his mature cows and deworming and vaccinating them with a killed vaccine for leptospirosis (vibrio), and a modified-live virus (MLV) vaccine for PI, IBR, BVD types I and II, and BRSV.

Seeing results

Between the low-birth-weight Angus bulls and the complete health program, Akins loses only a calf or two a year to either calving difficulties or health problems.

Since he has been constantly increasing in herd size, it is hard for

Self-help program gets a boost

Dennis Akins gives former county Extension educator Jim Collins a great deal of the credit for his herd make-over. However, of the many suggestions Collins made, advising Akins to apply for a Georgia Grazing Lands Conservation Coalition (GGLCC) grant, and helping him with the application process, was near the top.

In 2001, Akins received funds from the GGLCC to take his herd to an even higher level. The first order of business was to crossfence an existing pasture so his first- and second-calf heifers could be separated from the mature herd. The GGLCC money paid for the water line and fence material.

"I supplement them with soy hulls and cracked corn, or whatever is available and economical, in a self-feeder and give them free-choice hay," Akins says. "Now they don't have to compete with the mature cows."

University of Florida animal scientist John Arthington says this is a good move. "Supplementing heifers and young cows the same as the mature cow herd will result in poor reproductive performance from the young, still-growing females. On the other hand, supplementing the entire cow herd to meet the needs of the young females is expensive and wasteful, since the mature cows will get more nutrition than they require."

In addition to a separate pasture for his young females, Akins also used the GGLCC money to build a 5-acre pasture with permanent fencing for his bulls.

Akins to give numbers to back up the improvements. This past August, however, the weaning weights on his steers were 675 lb. and his heifers were in the 635-lb. range. On conception rates, last year he had three open cows out of 75.

The improvements he's made have also taken his cow herd from a row crop sideline to a major enterprise.

Still, to Akins, it is about more than numbers. "I wanted to have the satisfaction of producing a product I'm proud of," he says. "The marketing group does that. We're a check-and-balance system for each other. I'm not only looking at my cows, but the other members are, too."

He adds, "When you can group ideas, you do better. We are continuously trying to better our group, whether it is through animal identification or different strategies of marketing."

Chap Cromley says Akins is a key figure in that improvement. "Dennis has totally changed his operation. He used the SGCMA guidelines for his herd and it has really amazed us what can be done. He has not only caught up, he is setting the bar for the rest of us."

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A GGLCC grant helped Dennis Akins run a water line to a separate pasture for his first- and second-calf heifers.

He also put in a water line through the heifer pasture to the hay barn so he can supplement another group there.

While those improvements used all the GGLCC money, Akins is nowhere near through. Two years ago he bought a corral with holding pens, a sweep tub, an alleyway, scales, palpation cage, squeeze chute and headgate.

"It has been a tremendous help," he says. "Now I can sort cows and work them without them getting out. Safety is one of the big issues, too."

He is also in the process of building a lane system so he can move cows quickly and easily from one pasture to another and to the corral.

Putting in more watering systems is another priority so he can fence all his cattle out of his pond and provide fresh water for the whole herd.

He continues to bump up his genetics, too. Now that he has maxed out his pastures at 95-100 females, he is saving only heifers sired through artificial insemination (AI) for replacements.

He's in his third year of using a computer recordkeeping system, too.

But he's still not satisfied. Akins says, "There is still a long way to go."

For more information on the GGLCC, go to www.gglcc.com. If you are not in Georgia, contact the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) in your area to find a similar program in your state.