

# Simple Goals, Complex Route



Story & photos by  
**BECKY MILLS**

There's nothing terribly complicated about Charles Conklin's goals for his cattle operation. "We want to take care of the earth, and we want to use our genetics to produce a superior product," says the Thomasville, Ga., producer. Actually, there is one more pesky detail — he has to make a living off that same operation.

The complex part is merchandising his calf crop to meet those goals. Currently, he is adding value to his calves in at least four different enterprises, ranging from retained ownership in conventional Iowa feedlots to private-treaty sales of natural grass-fed beef.

## Marketing decisions

Conklin's first marketing decision occurs when he weans in August and September. After a month or two on a grass-based preconditioning program, the heavier calves from his 250-cow herd are sent to Iowa's Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) as part of the Georgia Beef Challenge, the state feedout program.

Conklin's Home Park Farm has participated in the beef challenge for the last four years, although he admits the feedlot program is quite a contrast to his all-natural, grass-based operation. He doesn't use chemical fertilizer, he doesn't implant his cattle, and he even quit deworming the majority of his cattle five years ago.

A vaccination program is a hard and fast requirement for the beef challenge, however. "I don't see anything wrong with challenging the immune system," Conklin comments. Before weaning, the calves get killed respiratory and viral products, then go back out with their

dams. After weaning, they get the modified-live virus (MLV) version of the vaccine.

Still, Conklin says his 500-pound (lb.) calves adapt to the feedlots in the Tri-County group. On the Iowa end, meticulous records are kept on gain, feed conversion and carcass traits. One set of his steers gained more than 3.5 lb. a day and graded 76% low-Choice or better and 41% upper two-thirds Choice or better. Another set of his steers gained 3.8 lb. a day and graded 80% low-Choice or better and 20% upper two-thirds Choice or better.

"They are in the upper half of the Standardized Performance Analysis (SPA) value," Conklin says. "They are making money."

He adds, "The more you send to the beef challenge, the more meaningful the data."

The number of cattle Conklin sends to the beef challenge ranges from around 80 to 100 head a year. He doesn't have to have a full truckload at a time, because other area cattlemen also send cattle to the program, and they can combine their cattle as needed.

## Getting the premium

The next load of calves goes to Coleman Natural Meats. Because of the distance to either Coleman's Colorado or Texas feedlots, and because Conklin is the only one in the area to feed with Coleman, a full load is necessary. Normally he puts the steers destined for the Coleman program through the winter on grass, so they usually average around 600 lb. each. He also signs a natural affidavit stating he has used no

antibiotics, implants or ionophores on the cattle.

He has been feeding with Coleman for nine years and says his cattle usually grade 80%-90% Choice. He says, though, there are more expenses with Coleman, including feeding only all-natural feed. It also takes more feed, since neither implants nor ionophores are used in the Coleman program.

Virginia Tech animal scientist Scott Greiner says the lack of implants in the feedlot phase is an economic consideration when producers are deciding between a conventional and an all-natural program.

Greiner asks, "What efficiencies are they giving up to get that premium?" He says a 2003

New Mexico study showed a difference in gross return per head of \$80 between implanted and nonimplanted cattle marketed on a grid

system, in favor of the implanted cattle. This translated to a profit advantage of \$44 per head for the implanted cattle. "A significant premium would need to be received for nonimplanted cattle to make up this difference," Greiner notes.

Currently, Conklin says the Coleman program is profitable for his cattle. "They base the price on a five-state weekly average, and our cattle are getting a \$25-per-hundredweight (cwt.) premium on the carcass."

He adds, however, "If the premium isn't there, the cattle on the beef challenge make more money."

## Private-treaty option

The next cut of cattle head into Conklin's private-treaty freezer beef

sales. "That's our most profitable market, even though we are only getting wholesale prices," he comments. He currently charges 90¢ per lb. live weight, and customers pay the processing.

Last year Conklin sold 30 head, usually a quarter of a beef at a time, through his private-treaty beef enterprise. He offers customers a choice between a grass-fed or grain-fed product.

"Market growth is painfully slow," he admits. "People have to change the way they buy meat and usually have to buy a freezer."

He says, though, "If you produce a good-tasting product at a fair value, you'll always have customers." Conklin ensures his customers are satisfied by not billing them until they have cooked and eaten part of the product.

## Sorting the herd

Home Park Farm also has a small core group of purebred Angus, and Conklin sells both bulls and heifers. "Breeding stock commands a premium," he says.

The marketing program for his seedstock is low-key. He relies on word of mouth and the reputation his steers are developing at the Georgia Beef Challenge. He also sends a handful of heifers to Georgia's Heifer Evaluation and Reproductive Development (HERD) program each year, where they are developed, bred and sold in the HERD sale.

Deciding which calves go into which program isn't that difficult. Conklin keeps an eye on the futures market, but for the beef challenge and Coleman, it is pretty much a product of calf weight and age. "The beef challenge likes them young, so we usually send those first," he says.

His private-treaty calves are often the lighter-weight tail-enders that

*(Continued on page 16)*

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—Charles Conklin

## Simple Goals *(from page 15)*

Charles Conklin adds value to his Angus and Angus-cross cattle by marketing them in a number of different marketing programs.



don't make it on the trucks to Iowa and Texas. "They still taste good, though," he emphasizes.

Obviously, it takes a versatile critter to fit in the operation. For starters, Conklin's operation is all-natural, so he tries to stay away from purchased hay or grain since he doesn't have all-natural sources nearby. The pickings can get a little slim at times.

Also, the ability to grade Choice or higher is a key factor in the profitability for the beef challenge or Coleman.

"We shoot for animals that perform well on limited rations," Conklin notes. "Their performance is supplied by their genetics and the limited rations are supplied by natural limitations. Hopefully we'll get the ideal animal."

### **The right ones**

Picking the right replacement heifers is obviously vital, so Conklin developed his own selection index. Except for his purebred cattle, he doesn't take birth weights. So, rather than using the Beef Improvement Federation's (BIF's) weight per day of age (WDA) formula, which has an adjustment for birth weight, he includes birth weight in his WDA estimates. He also takes cow weights at weaning and does another calculation for cow efficiency. For example, if a cow weighs 1,000 lb. and her calf weighs 500 lb., the cow efficiency number is 0.5. He adds that to the potential replacement heifer's WDA to come up with an index for her. Then he looks at her sire's and dam's pedigrees, as well as any physical defects or disposition problems.

### **Still Angus**

While Home Park Farm has changed dramatically in the 50 years since Charles Conklin's grandparents bought the Thomsville, Ga., farm, one thing remains the same — the breed.

"My grandparents had a small herd of purebred Angus in Illinois, and that's the breed we started with here," Conklin says.

When Conklin took over the management of the farm in 1978, they were farming and raising cattle conventionally. Now, he strives to run the operation on minimal inputs. Grass and clover replace corn silage, and broiler litter substitutes for chemical fertilizer.

The Angus stayed, though. "They are the best all-around females," he explains.

And Conklin, who sells finished cattle in markets that demand quality beef, says, "We are sold on the marbling argument. Angus always have been geared toward quality."



Selection is an integral part of Conklin's ability to market his cattle in a variety of programs.

calving intervals and fertility of the bull's dam rate high on his list.

"The dam of the last bull I bought had been in the herd a long time, and her calving interval was yearly," Conklin says. "The breeder said she tended to be thin, but she produced those good calves year after year."

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Supervisor Terry Harris knows Conklin's operation from his work with the Georgia Beef Challenge. He says Conklin's ability to add value to his cattle and meet his goals is a combination of genetics and attitude.

"Charles pays attention to his genetics," Harris states. "Through specialty programs like the Georgia Beef Challenge, he gets information back

on his cattle. That information either supports his genetic decisions or allows him to make changes.

"Charles may not embrace every new idea that comes along," Harris continues, "but when he sees an opportunity, he looks at it with an open mind."



"Picking replacement heifers is hard," he admits. "I usually save around 40 a year, but a lot of them don't make it — maybe half in a couple of years."

When he is choosing bulls, balance rules. "I've always selected for multiple traits. I don't want any EPDs (expected progeny differences) that are too extreme." He continues, "I want a reasonable birth weight and an above-average weaning and yearling weight, but not too much milk. And, scrotal circumference is really important for fertility."

Conklin does emphasize marbling EPDs, but he still doesn't want extremes. He says the higher-marbling animals tend to be harder keepers. Although marbling is intramuscular fat, Greiner says there is still much to be learned about the relationship between marbling and maternal traits.

"Associations between high-marbling cattle and harder-keeping cattle may be the result of other factors, such as milk production, growth and mature size," Greiner says. "We do know that matching genetic potential to the environment is important, as cows that do produce more milk do require more energy. Higher milk production can create problems with lower body condition scores (BCSs) and reproductive challenges if proper energy levels aren't met." He emphasizes, "Balanced trait selection is critical."

However, if you subscribe to the theory that fat is fat, and higher-marbling animals tend to produce pudgy finished cattle, that's not necessarily so, either.

Greiner says, "The Angus breed has demonstrated a relatively low genetic correlation between marbling ability and exterior fat cover. It is genetically possible to design cattle that meet optimum quality grades without sacrificing cutability."

#### **Attention to genetics**

Unless the daughters of Conklin's bulls can produce a calf and breed back every year under his conditions, they aren't making him money. That's why