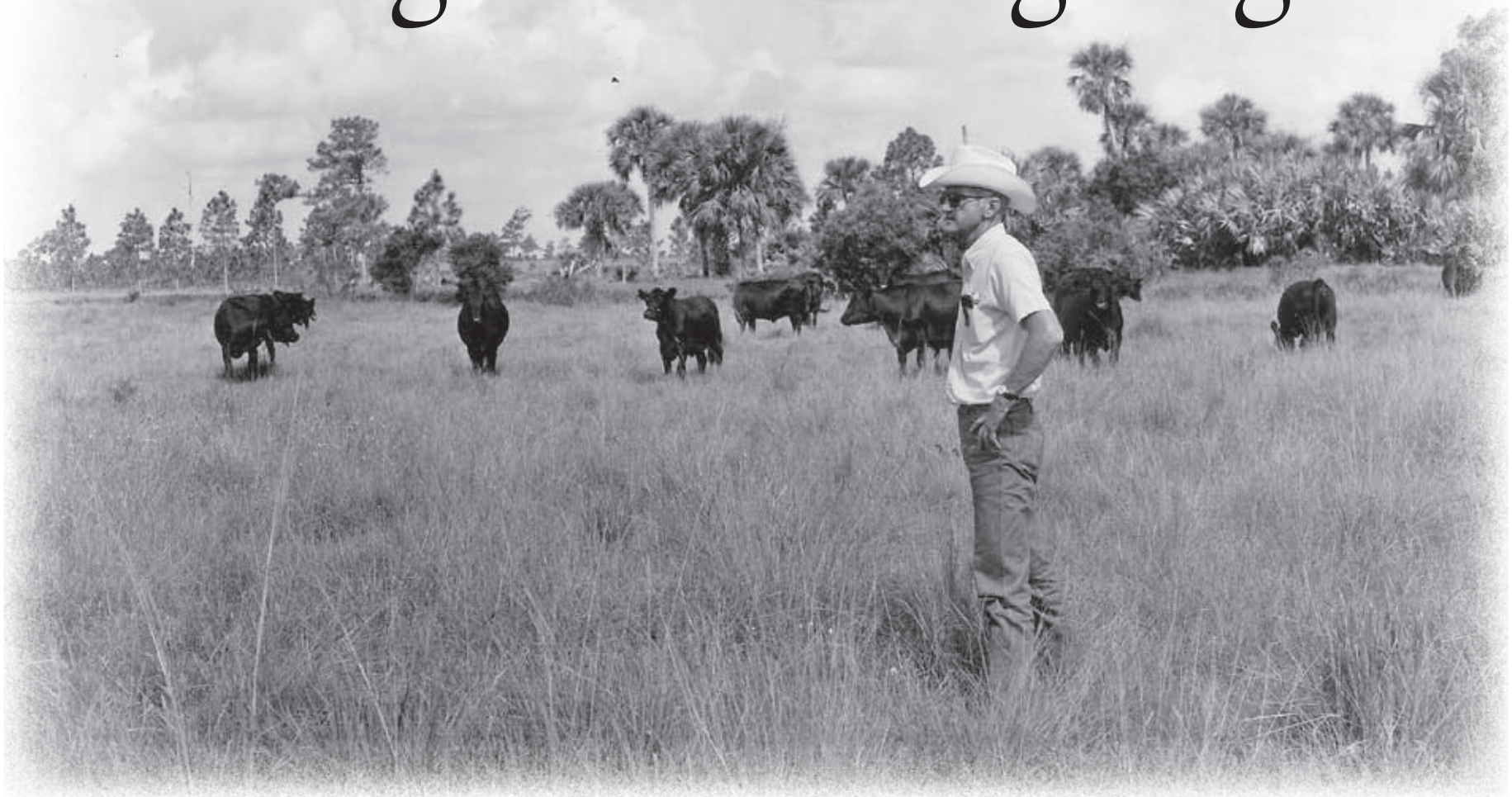
Doing Something Right



Pressure and discipline can produce high-quality Angus just about anywhere.

Story by
JACKIE EAGER

People are often surprised to find high-quality cattle in Florida, but they thrive where careful managers understand how to fit them to the restrictive environment.

Quality is never automatic, but Richard Kelley helped show what is possible between the shores in the Sunshine State. He took the reins at Monreve Ranch near Stuart, Fla., more than 50 years ago and became renowned for the exceptional results obtained through strategic selection pressure.

"When everyone else was just raising whatever came along, Kelley set a goal of what he wanted to achieve and implemented the selection and pasture management to achieve that goal," says Alvin Warnick, University of Florida animal science emeritus professor.

Kelley, now an Indiantown, Fla., ranch management consultant and author, was able to adapt and build up efficiency in Angus cattle by challenging the females to conform to a rigid program, culling as necessary. That began with taking stock of productivity, then sorting the cattle into three groups: most productive, moderately productive and least productive, he recalls. "Sorting let me pick replacements from the top cattle in the herd."

"Any successful breeding program has to be simple. Breed the best to the best and you increase productivity."

— Richard Kelley

He learned that tactic while at New Mexico State University studying under John Knox and Marvin Kroger, whom Warnick notes were two of the top beef specialists in the country at the time. The tough, arid environment there translated well to Florida's differently harsh climate.

Emphasis on the females at Monreve Ranch meant if they did not produce to established parameters, they were shown the gate because Kelley knew how to find better replacements. Over time, cows that lacked the fertility and vigor to cope with the environment were weeded out.

"Any successful breeding program has to be simple," he says. "Breed the best to the best and you increase productivity."

Kelley kept his production-rated herds in separate pastures with the best bulls turned in to cover the A herd; the next-best, the B herd; and the rest, C females. All replacements came from the A team, and after a few years a new level emerged.

"Our super cows formed an AA herd," he says. "From the beginning, they grazed our poorest pastures, as those bred under less favorable conditions could make it when times got really tough."

In a few years, he would discover the same rigid selection parameters made for calves that went on to profitable feeding and top carcass quality in Iowa.

Nutrition

Meanwhile, Kelley paid close attention to cattle nutrition and forage quality on the ranch. Most cows would calve on native range, before moving to the best pastures a few weeks later. High-quality grass stimulated milk production and reproduction systems, making the cows come back into heat early and settle fast.

"That's how we kept the herd on a short breeding season," he says.

Within the first 21 days of the season, 70% of cows calved. Heifers were allowed 42 days, but at a time when many Florida ranchers were still using year-round breeding programs.

Angus genetics came from Wye Plantation.

"They were the largest, growthiest, most well-muscled bulls of the time," Warnick says. "Kelley was a pioneer in artificially

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Above: Richard Kelley (pictured here in 1960) took the reins at Monreve Ranch near Stuart, Fla., more than 50 years ago and became renowned for the exceptional results obtained through strategic selection pressure.

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inseminating (AIing) the AA herd with the better part of these gain-tested Angus bulls, until he was producing better than he could buy."

Calves in demand

"Steer calves are the byproduct of a breeding program," Kelley says. "It's heifer production that should guide the development of the cow herd." The rest would surely follow, as shown by what those byproducts achieved beyond topping the market.

"His steers were in great demand by feeders in the Midwest, repeat customers that wanted his steers year-round," Warnick says. In particular, Kelley recalls that Elmer Reimer of Schleswig, Iowa, fed many successive calf crops from the 1960s into the 1980s. The steers in 1970 weighed nearly 1,200 pounds (lb.), brought $31 to $32.50 per cwt., and went half USDA Choice, half Prime at the IBP plant in Denison, Iowa.

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The relationship with Wye Plantation helped Kelley lead the way in selection that included carcass merit. When Reimer sent in a 1983 load of the Florida steers that once again hit all the targets with no Yield Grade 4s, the IBP buyer reportedly said, "I don't know what you did, but you did something right."

"Producers simply have not culled enough, and they are losing quality because of it."

— Richard Kelley

Any Angus producer could do that, and probably double the national acceptance rate of 19.5% for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, Kelley maintains.

"Producers simply have not culled enough," he says, "and they are losing quality because of it."

His own record of success came from "managing for the worst years, not the best," Kelley says. He still works to ensure ranchers embrace good management practices through his book, *You Did Something Right: The Case for Selective Breeding*.

"A lot of people talk about maximum efficiency, but it needs to be about optimal efficiency," he says. "You need to reach for that point in the herd where everything comes together."

To get started, Kelley suggests producers start thinking in terms of a business plan. "Find the best producers in your area to learn from," he says. "Then set up a program that helps you apply selection pressure for your environment."