



Cows with attitudes don't stay in the USDA/ARS herd in Watkinsville, Ga.

Calm Through & Through

Calm temperaments are vital from ranch to rail.

Story & photos by
BECKY MILLS

The feeders for the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) Program feel like they've won the lottery when they get a pen of Angus calves from the Watkinsville, Ga., U.S. Department of Agriculture/Agricultural Research Service (USDA/ARS) herd. "We had a pen three years ago," says Brent Lorimor, Farragut, Iowa, feeder, "that was one of the easiest-handling pens of cattle I can recall feeding."

The numbers back up his statement. Iowa State University animal scientists give the calves a disposition score every time they come through the chute. A score of 1 means the calf is so calm it is all but yawning, and a 5 is wild as a buck. In the five years the Watkinsville steers and heifers were fed with TCSCF, their disposition scores ranged from 1.0 to 1.9, with most of the scores at or below 1.5.

Animal scientist John Stuedemann says the attitude, or

lack of it, has been bred into the cattle since the herd was started in the 1950s. "We never sat down and said, 'We are going to breed for disposition,'" the researcher says. "But when you handle animals as much as we handle them, they have to be calm. If they are excitable or crazy, they are out of here. We can't risk the safety of our people."

He means it. Herdsman Colin McKaig says, "Three cows put me in the bed of my truck during calving season. We sold them as cow-calf pairs. We have student workers out here. We can't have that."

Raising red flags

Besides the "survival of the nicest" approach, Stuedemann says they also tend to look at certain lines and families when they select bulls for the herd. If a bull comes from a line known for producing less than stellar dispositions, he gets a red flag.

Since the cattle are commercial, the cows don't have pedigrees, but Stuedemann says the 250-cow herd has been closed to outside females

for at least 35 years, so their temperaments are known.

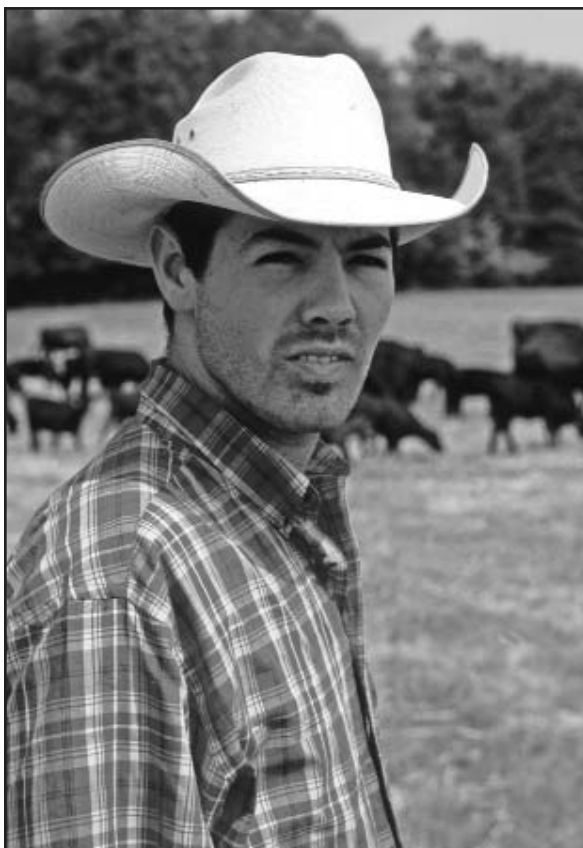
Rhonda Vann, animal scientist at the Brown Loam Branch Experiment Station, Raymond, Miss., is involved in a seven-state cooperative study on cattle disposition. She agrees with the Watkinsville station's approach of weeding out the bad actors. "Have rigorous culling standards for the cattle in your herd. If you purchase bulls, take their disposition into consideration," she says.

On the cows, though, she cautions, "There is a happy medium between mothering ability and temperament. You do want the cows somewhat protective."

Developing a mind-set

However, genes don't get all the credit for a well-mannered herd. Vann states, "The way the cattle are handled probably has more of a lasting effect on their temperament."

"I think one of the biggest things is the mentality of the people working the cattle," McKaig says. "I come from a range-cattle



Herdsman Colin McKaig says there are calm ways to work cattle and rough ways to work cattle. He prefers calmer methods.

background — bang, bang through the chute, hurry up. But, there are rough ways to work cattle and calm ways.”

“You have to develop a mind-set,” Stuedemann agrees. “The fastest way to work cattle is slowly.”

He adds, “When I came here, we had nose tongs and hot sticks. We threw those away. If you are going to work cattle all the time, something that produces pain conditions them against what you’re trying to do. They associate going in the chute with pain.”

While Stuedemann had other responsibilities the last few years, once again, electric prods showed up at the station. McKaig remedied that when he came in January. “That’s the first thing I did. I went through the farm trucks and threw away the hot shots.”

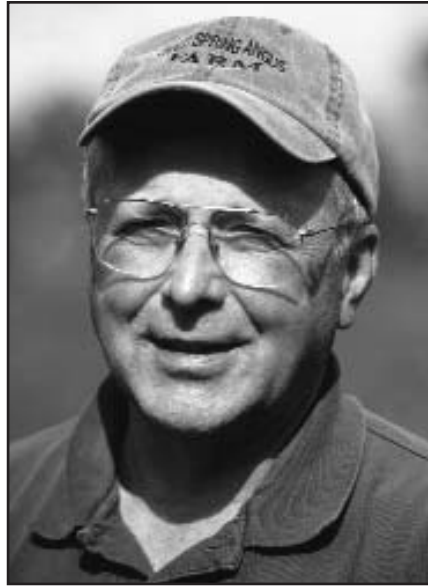
“Conditioning is so important,” adds Dwight Seman, an animal scientist at the Watkinsville station. “At least once a month the cows, heifers and steers go through the chute to be weighed. It amazes me how quickly they settle down.”

Stuedemann emphasizes, “If the animal is doing what you want it to do, don’t yell at it or poke it. We don’t yell around here, period.”

“Work the cattle very quietly,” Vann agrees. “And minimize the use of a hot shot, except in extreme emergencies.”

Beyond convenience

While docile cattle make life easier, there may well be an economic incentive to keeping them calm. “We’re looking at how temperament relates to production, gains, feedlot performance and harvest,” Vann says. “For example, we’re finding out the steaks out of more temperamental animals are less tender.”



Animal scientist John Stuedemann says the fastest way to work cattle is slowly.

Stuedemann says it is hard to find a direct link between feedlot gains and temperament in the cattle from the experiment station, but he isn’t complaining. “It is difficult to show a relationship between disposition scores and average daily gain (ADG) because generally, in these cattle, both are good.”

ADGs ranged from 3.1 pounds (lb.) to 4.6 lb. for the Watkinsville calves the years they were fed with TCSCF.

All Lorimor knows is that he wants more of them.

“Their health was excellent, we had very few pulls, and the gain was terrific,” he says. “And, they were very gentle. They practically lined themselves up in the chute.”



Angus through and through

If you are interested in crossbreeding research, the U.S. Department of Agriculture/Agricultural Research Service (USDA/ARS) herd in Watkinsville, Ga., is not for you. The cattle are straight-Angus.

John Stuedemann, animal scientist at the station for the last 35 years, admits to a bit of a bias. “I showed my first registered Angus heifer in 1953. Plus, these cattle were here when I got here.”

If you’re looking for a more scientific explanation, Stuedemann has that, too. “This station is not oriented toward genetic research; it is oriented toward forage and health research, parasite control, and the impact of cattle on our natural resource base, such as soil and water quality.

“We also have small pastures,” he continues. “That doesn’t lend itself to genetic work.” He says commercial Angus work just fine for the station’s studies on fescue toxicosis, grass tetany and parasite control, though.

He adds, “You need to have high-performing cattle to do the kind of research we’re doing. The cattle need to be able to respond to the different treatments. These cattle have improved over the years because the breed itself has improved.”

They continue to perform when they leave the station, too. In five years of custom feeding with Iowa’s Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) Program, 816 head of steers and heifers posted average daily gains (ADGs) ranging from 3.1 pounds (lb.) to 4.6 lb. Only 30 of those animals graded Select, while the remainder graded Choice or better. A total of 381 head earned the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand label.

For the Watkinsville station, straight-Angus cattle have just what it takes.