

Discovering the Best

Hands-on data collection and 50 years of application lead Alabaman to top cattle.

Story & photos by
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It's a wonder Billy Womack doesn't get a chill when he looks at the carcass data from his cattle. Not that the numbers are gloomy, far from it. But because the Ashford, Ala., producer grew up helping his father collect carcass data the old-fashioned way — hands on, in the cooler.

"I know by '64 my father was getting carcass information from Sunnyland Packing in Dothan," Womack recalls. "Six months out of the year we would carry 12 to 13 steers up there every Friday."

By the early 1990s, fed markets and harvest facilities had all but left the Southeast. Although Womack's

father passed away in 1972, his insistence on collecting data — and using it — stayed with the younger Womack.

He just took a different approach and sent the Angus steers from his Rocky Creek Farms to feedlots and harvest facilities via Auburn's Pasture to Rail program. The Alabama group used feedlots and markets that tended to favor leaner cattle, though, so in 1996 Womack started sending his cattle to Iowa's Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) through the Georgia Beef Challenge, the neighboring state's feed-out program.

It turns out, that was a good move. Womack's steers, entered with a sample of other cattle fed in the TCSCF group, are the 2006 grand champions of the National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC).

Even more impressive, not to mention ironic, the other steers that ended up in the pen with Womack's by luck of the draw all share at least a smattering of Rocky Creek Farms genetics.

The penmates to Womack's steers include Charles Conklin's Home Park Farm and Terry Harris's Harris Livestock from Georgia, and Prairie Cattle and Shand & Shand from Alabama.

Plain luck

In Womack's case, these aren't handpicked steers. They are simply the steers from his commercial calf crop in 2005. As usual, he also included bulls from his purebred

herd that didn't show promise and were banded at weaning.

Little wonder his cattle are making their mark in the NACC. Look at the numbers from 46 of his steers harvested in the late spring and early summer of 2006:

- 26 met *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) requirements;
- eight were Prime;
- all were at least low-Choice; and
- all were Yield Grade (YG) 2 or 3.



Above: Billy Womack started helping his father collect carcass data on their cattle in 1964.



Right: Daniel Howell is learning the cattle business from Womack, his father-in-law.

Ask Womack why his cattle are doing so well in the contests and futurities, and he'll say it is plain luck. When pressed, he'll admit he had a bit to do with it, but still gives most of the credit to the Iowa group.

"The steers I send out there every year are half due to me getting the right genetics, and the other half due to what they do up there," he says. "They do better there than anywhere I've ever sent them. You can't beat those guys in Iowa."

Womack continues, "Mr. Busby (Darrell Busby, Iowa State University Extension beef specialist) is excellent. They give you more data than you know what to do with." Busby and the TCSCF staff collect and compile data on everything from the feedlot performance of the cattle fed in the futurity to their disposition to their carcass value.

Still, Womack does know what to do with those numbers.

"Last year I evaluated the data from 78 herds with steers in the Tri-County Futurity," Busby says. "I only included herds that sent most of their steers and sent at least 20 head. One herd gained slightly better, but no herd had better quality grades than the Womack herd."

"This year is no fluke," says Mike Davis, Marion Junction, Ala. Davis started his Extension career as a county agent in Womack's county. Now, he is the forage specialist at Auburn's Black Belt Research Station.

"I've worked with a lot of cattlemen in 35 years," Davis says. "I think he is one of the best."

Davis has bought both bulls and heifers from Womack for his own small herd. "He understands what it takes to get an animal to perform, and he can identify those that won't."

Womack says, "In the early '50s my father got serious about his cattle, and from the start he was interested in performance. He was not enamored of the showring, and was among the first of the performance people. He was one of the founders of the Alabama Beef Cattle Improvement Association."

Then to now

The elder Womack started gain-testing bulls for the animal science department at Oklahoma State University, and then bought two of the bulls. "That's when we really started making progress," Womack says.

In the 1970s, Womack began using artificial insemination (AI) on the herd, which now numbers 220 cows. He hasn't

bought a bull or a female since.

Whether he is choosing an AI sire for the 125-head registered herd or one of his homebred bulls for the commercial cattle, he insists on moderation, starting with birth weights. "If you decide a calf has to weigh 60 pounds (lb.) at birth, the other traits go away," he says. "You have to balance everything. The same on milk, if she is too milky, she won't breed back

unless you put a lot of feed in her.

"It is the same for weaning and yearling weight," he continues. "And when breeders decided to jack up the height of the Angus, they about killed the breed."

Extremes "just flat won't work" on Womack's operation. He practically has a ban on grain, even for growing his

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Womack's daughter, Andrea Howell, is helping computerize his cattle records.

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young bulls. About the only time they see a morsel is when he is getting the 2-year-olds ready to sell. Then, from Thanksgiving through the time they are sold, usually starting in February, they get 5 lb. of soy hulls per head per day.

As for the effect of moderation and a Spartan existence on carcass

quality, Womack says, "I don't see where breeding for easy keepers has hurt anything."

Although carcass traits are just part of the overall package, Womack is pleased with the tools now available in that area.

"Ultrasound is a great thing," he states. "In the '60s, the problem was we wouldn't

know how good a bull was until he was about gone."

Now, Virginia veterinarian and ultrasound technician Andy Meadows ultrasounds both heifers and yearling bulls on Rocky Creek Farms.

Those data, along with his gain test on forage and the use of expected progeny

differences (EPDs), help Womack select bulls like his RCF Rock Ambush 55F. "He's nothing to look at, but he knows what Prime means," Womack says. "Out of the last eight Primes, he sired five of them."

And this, Womack says, is when he truly starts to see the benefits of almost half a century of selection. "When you get a bunch of CABs and Primes, it pays pretty good."

Dos and don'ts for breeding carcass quality

The good news is carcass traits are highly heritable, so it is possible to change them fairly quickly. The other good news is producers have top-notch tools in expected progeny differences (EPDs) and ultrasound. But Scott Greiner, Virginia Tech animal scientist, says to proceed with caution if you're on a mission to bump up carcass grades.

"First, you need to establish a benchmark relative to carcass merit," Greiner says. He says state feed-out trials are an excellent way for producers to experiment with retained ownership and get carcass data on their cattle. He advises producers to think it through, though, before making sweeping changes based on just one year's data from a sample of your calf crop.

"The sampling needs to be done accurately — make sure it is representative. That is hard to do with just one sample of calves from one year," Greiner says.

Establishing a goal is equally as important as getting a benchmark, he notes. Then you can work on the roadmap between the two. That's where EPDs for carcass traits come in.

"Secondly, it is important that selection be done in a balanced manner," Greiner emphasizes. "Carcass merit is an important factor in profitability. But growth rate and health are equally important. The cattle have to grow fast and grow efficiently to be profitable."

He adds, "Keep terminal traits in balance with maternal traits like reproductive efficiency and cow efficiency and milk production. Then keep those traits in concert with your feed resources and management. It sounds simple, but it is hard to do."