

Bred Into Them

Genetic capacity to marble helps producer turn a lemon of a situation into lemonade.

by *Miranda Reiman*

If the circumstances were different, it would make the outcome easier to celebrate. After all, the results are worth a little whooping and hollering. It's not every day 1,000 head of Angus cattle turn in a report with 91% hitting the marbling target for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, and 31% of those CAB Prime.

But it's not every day that a carcass-focused, seedstock Angus ranch sells that many of its registered progeny as steers. That takes a "perfect storm," says Dick Beck, manager of Three Trees Ranch, which sent a large portion of its fall 2008 calf crop to Wheeler Bros. Feedyard at Watonga, Okla. They spent 245 days on feed and were harvested in spring 2010.

Three Trees, at Sharpsburg, Ga., had the misfortune of finding major herd sires with genetic defects, so Beck was already thinking about cleaning house. Then, the general economic conditions and a sustained drought convinced him to sell more than 1,100 calves off grass.

"Prewearing, we probably did everything that every expert will tell you not to do to young cattle," Beck says. "They were given modified-live vaccines, but they were not fed any grain in most cases, and the cows were under quite a lot of stress when they were in utero, so I guess that further reinforces my belief in the importance of genetics."

The Three Trees program has been centered on the end product for a long time. "Our attitude has always been that this breed is famous for calving ease, milk and marbling, and cattle have to be at least breed average or better for those three things or we don't really consider them registered Angus cattle," Beck says. "So that set of cattle was designed to be the very top of the breed for marbling."

When they ended up as part of an in-house implant trial for Bos-Technica Research, a sister company of Koers-Turgeon Consulting Services Inc., well, that was just an added bonus. It gave the team a chance to look at how each treatment affected both performance and carcass quality.

"We didn't specifically set out to find high-grading cattle for this trial," says nutritionist Shane Davis, consultant and Bos-Technica research manager. "They were available and we were able to take advantage of that and analyze it in hindsight."

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One of the main steer trials compared a single-dose implant program to a re-implant program.

"If we can do with one implant what two can do, both performance-wise and carcass-wise, and eliminate animal handling, that minimizes stress on the animal and on the feedlot labor force," Abe Turgeon, Bos-Technica and Koers-Turgeon co-owner, says.

Their work found no difference between performance on a re-implant program vs. a single dose, but the latter did favor carcass quality.

"These programs are geared toward maximizing profitability by optimizing both live animal performance and carcass performance in the packing house," Turgeon says.

Still, neither treatment seemed to set the cattle back too much in marbling.

"It appears that the more genetic potential cattle have to grade, the less impact an implant program might have on quality grade," Turgeon says.

Feedyard attention

Management at the feedyard also helped them express that genetic potential, he adds.

"Calves need to get high-energy feed early on and throughout life to really initiate and

maximize their marbling development," he says. "These cattle started on a fairly high-energy, dense starter diet, and when they hit top ration after about 45 days, they never looked back."

The cattle gained 3.9 pounds (lb.) per day and had a feed-to-gain ratio of 4.5 to 1.

Bill Roser, manager at Wheeler Bros., says that the genetics made up for anything the cattle lacked early in life.

"If you're going to have things happen not quite right, you'd rather have it on a real front-end set of genetics, because they're going to handle it better," he says. "It's the same if you're going to have \$6 corn. I'd rather have a good set of cattle than a poorer-quality pen because they're going to feed so much better. With these challenges, quality pays even bigger dividends than it does when everything is easy."

For Beck, this not-so-easy time was "a chance to take lemons and make pretty neat lemonade."

Even though he didn't own the cattle, he got carcass data back.

"We're trying to use this data to help our customers and get more involved in feeding aspects down the road," he says. "The exciting thing for us was the validation that when you stack those genetics up, it absolutely works."

He hopes that's a source of encouragement for fellow Angus breeders who might be backing away from marbling.

"Because the genetic defects mostly occurred in the high-carcass-value cattle in the breed, a lot of purebred people incorrectly equate the two," Beck says, noting some are abandoning the progress the breed is known for. "If we don't continue our focus, there are others who'll be happy to take more and more of our market share."

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