



Why not?

An Iowa cattleman's questions lead to answers for his cow herd.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

It was 1970-something and Lyle Gossling of Decorah, Iowa, was riding shotgun in his grandpa's shiny new Buick as they pattered from farm to farm. Or perhaps the youngster and his mentor were out with the Farmall B cutting hay with a sickle mower. Gossling doesn't remember the task, but he clearly remembers the conversation.

After a series of half a dozen whys, the incessant interrogation was likely wearing on Grandpa Louie and he answered, "To make you ask questions."

That didn't deter the boy. Instead, Gossling's natural curiosity followed the cattleman into adulthood and helped him make continuous improvements on his 160-head commercial-Angus herd.

"I know I drive people crazy. It's just my curious mind working overtime," he says. Seedstock supplier John Wessel of Pine View

Angus, Colesburg, Iowa, gets his fair share of calls. "I promise you, John doesn't have another bull customer who asks a fraction of the questions I ask."

"It's constant," Wessel concurs. "The first time he called me about bulls, we talked for two hours. He asked questions I hadn't even thought of. He studies pedigrees intensely. He'll be back there 10 generations and wonder why we made that mating decision."

Wessel doesn't mind.

"That's also a sign of somebody who doesn't think he's got it all figured out either," says Wessel, adding that most people who've had the success that Gossling has had tend to become content with where they are. "Most of the time they're pretty proud of what they've done, but Lyle still knows that every day he's got more to learn, and we all do. He looks forward to learning it. It's refreshing."

Starting pure

As Gossling made his way through North High School at West Union, Iowa, there was no doubt he would make his career in farming. When he graduated in 1984, some of his classmates headed to college. He and Grandpa headed to the sale barn.

"Everything was yellow Simmies and Grandpa said, 'Nah, we're not going that way,'" Gossling recalls. So they waited a few more years for the right opportunity. A local purebred breeder near Decorah was downsizing, and Gossling's grandpa helped him purchase several purebred-Angus cows to build his cow herd.

"Dad was pretty hesitant. He'd been all commercial," Gosling says, but when the purebred calves weaned off as big or bigger, that was all the proof he needed.

"To get the predictability you almost have to straightbreed," Gossling says. "I can tell the more you stack, the better it gets."

► **Above:** "To get the predictability you almost have to straightbreed," says Decorah, Iowa, cattleman Lyle Gossling. "I can tell the more you stack, the better it gets."

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For him, it's about predictable information, too.

"I thought maybe we could take advantage of those numbers. I didn't understand what they all meant, but I knew we could use them and add value somehow," he says. Since then, additional expected progeny differences (EPDs) have been developed, ultrasound information has been added and genomics were born.

"He looks at things comprehensively," Wessel says of his inquisitive customer. "He studies everything from phenotype to skeletal structure to movement, but what he does better than anybody is coupling that back with the data that is available."

Recently, Gossling started sending his calves to a neighbor with a small finishing lot, and now he has carcass data on his fed cattle. Last year 87 head, sold at 13-15 months of age, went 58% Prime.

Gossling has a game plan to make them even better.

"He always knows what his next step is going to be to improve that cow herd, and he goes about it very methodically," Wessel says.

Prepping for next semester

Gossling may not have the degree to prove it, but he spends as much time — probably more — than any collegian reading and studying. Then he takes that book knowledge out to the pasture.

At weaning, Gossling will visit Pine View



► Always a student, Gossling continues to ask questions seeking how to better his herd's performance.

to look at the upcoming crop of bulls. A few months later, he comes back with his target sire groups and the sort continues from there. After the bulls are scanned by ultrasound, Gossling uses that information to whittle his list down to a dozen or fewer that he'll consider purchasing to keep his herd headed in the right direction.

"I've always put emphasis on trying to buy high marbling, big ribeye and negative fat," he says. "I want to produce the best product I can."

Grading at a young age is important to him.

"I understand other parts of the country making yearlings, but right here where we have the resources right at our fingertips, it's more efficient to keep moving them through," Gossling says.

For all the time he's spent trying to make the ideal steak, the perfect female is the ultimate goal. While most of his neighbors are buying bred cows at the sale barn, he's selling reputation heifers at the Pine View commercial heifer sale.



“To me, I’ve got less problems because I know what I’m getting,” Gossling says. “They’ll say, ‘Those heifers are too much hassle.’ But for me, it isn’t. I don’t get up in the middle of the night. They’re in God’s hands at night, and I don’t worry about it because I know she can do it.”

As he sees cows in the pasture, he can call out their pedigrees. He knows how their progeny have performed and might even find a newspaper clipping of their sire’s sire as a champion at the Iowa Beef Expo a decade earlier. Yet the youthful curiosity still gets the best of him.

“How do you figure out what’s under the hide?” he asks, noting that he’s turned to commercial DNA testing to gather even more information.

“I wanted to validate to myself that it was worth spending extra money on better genetics,” Gossling says, so last year he used GeneMax™ on 60 heifers. The scores ranged from highs of 99, with perfect 5s for marbling and gain potential, down to 25 for lowest. All but seven were above 70, and more than half scored 90 or better. (For more on how to interpret GeneMax scores, visit www.cabpartners.com/genemax/results.php).

“It sure did open my eyes and will make it impossible for me to keep a replacement heifer that isn’t tested. You can’t physically stand on an outside of a pen and tell what’s in there,” he says.

Always a student, Gossling asked another question.

“How do I know whether or not they got the right marker?” he wondered. So Gossling took the 16 heifers he planned to keep and scanned them using ultrasound. Matching up the results was an astounding exercise.

The poorest-scoring female didn’t look any different from the rest.

“When you walk up to the pen, you couldn’t tell she doesn’t have it. With the ultrasound, she was also the lowest,” he says. The highest DNA marks also received the most positive evaluation via ultrasound.

Gossling is now in his second year of employing the DNA technology, and he’s going to try an experiment with the low-scoring heifers.

“It’s going to be fun for me,” he says, explaining that he will mate them to his highest-marbling bulls to see if he can improve upon their marbling ability or if they just “don’t have it.” In the future, any that test below 70 may not stay in his herd.

Gossling is building pent-up demand for his heifers because he won’t sell all culls as breeding stock. Take the disposition problem that he wasn’t willing to propagate.

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— Lyle Gosling

“It’s really terrible with the demand for heifers [so high], but I just couldn’t stick somebody with heifers that are crazy. I would never sleep at night,” he says. So they headed to the feedyard, while he retained the remainder of the females.

Adding more data

Calving season will give him another year’s worth of data to add to his selection pool, and the study will continue.

For all the reading and studying, his time spent out among the herd is perhaps the most valuable data gathering of all. Plus, it’s good for the soul.

“I love calving time,” Gossling says. “Even with the struggles or dragging a calf home and everything else, I still love what I do.”

During the winters he gets to know every inch of his land as he keeps up an active trapping schedule, catching raccoons,

beavers and muskrat, but his summertime hobby and work can’t be as easily separated.

“I just enjoy watching the calves out to pasture, so I’ll take an evening tour of the different farms,” Gossling says.

Harsh sun keeps the cattle shaded up during the day, but as it sinks toward the horizon, that’s Gossling’s favorite time to check in on them.

He has seven pastures in all, between ground he and his family own and those he rents from neighbors who used to operate small dairies. A promise to fence them earned the right to manage a couple dozen cows on the small parcels of rolling hillside.

“I’m probably the only guy around here putting fence in,” he laughs, surveying the crop ground around him.

Grandpa might not be there to “learn him stuff” anymore, but Gossling still parks at the edge of a clearing and checks cows on foot, the way Grandpa used to do. It’s then that it’s obvious the greatest trait passed on from that generation.

“People tell me I should get a 4-wheeler, but I guess I just don’t pace my life that fast. Besides, I like being in with my cows,” he says. “The farmer in all of us . . . how do you resist that black cow against that green grass?”



Editor’s Note: *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for CAB.*



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