



# New Plans, Same Direction

CAB award winner builds back with quality-focused genetics.

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

It was a beautiful fall day in Montana's Judith Basin, but Doug Stevenson wasn't enjoying the sunshine and mild temperatures.

Hectic weeks led up to the 2010 Basin Angus Ranch dispersion, and when sale time arrived, the "overwhelmed" feeling gave way to alternate waves of relief and melancholy.

"It was a sad day. It was a hard decision," the breeder says, but he knew it was the right one.

"We had kind of built a monster. It was a high-stress environment and too all-consuming for too long a time," Stevenson says.

During the three-day event in late October, he and his wife, Sharon, sold 2,000 head. A month later, the couple marketed commercial

females and that year's bull crop. Shortly after that, the land went under contract to its new buyer.

Stevenson's family, which includes daughters Brittany, Leisa and Nicole, remained in Hobson, Mont., so the eldest could finish high school. Their father planned a career in consulting.

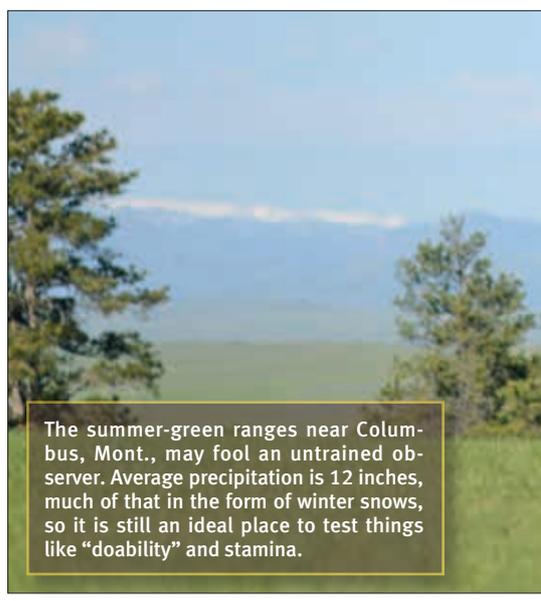
Stevenson had devoted much of his life to building the Basin herd, carrying on a legacy started by his late father, Wayne. As the calendar turned over to 2011, he was left with just 100 fertilized embryos in an outside cooperator herd.

Days were spent delivering animals and wrapping up postsale paperwork. The family searched for a new home, close to an airport and other business interests.

In the back of Stevenson's mind were those embryos.

Finally, a late-summer herd visit changed the family's course again, when he checked

in on those embryo-transfer (ET) calves in a preconditioning pen.



The summer-green ranges near Columbus, Mont., may fool an untrained observer. Average precipitation is 12 inches, much of that in the form of winter snows, so it is still an ideal place to test things like "doability" and stamina.



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that most people would call extremes on the carcass traits, but we didn't do it by chasing the extremes."

Don't mistake "being fortunate" for sheer luck. There's a plan behind every mating.

"I'm a data freak," Stevenson admits.

"That's a key to making progress."

There is one weekly appointment the rancher almost never misses: the Friday 7 a.m. expected progeny difference (EPD) update from the American Angus Association.

"I try to make sure I've got a good part of Friday to be able to study the data," he says. That has changed from the twice yearly re-rankings of the past. "Now we're not waiting on the data. We're studying it constantly to see what we can learn and to see how we can make improvements."

For all the office time, the pasture is often the best classroom.

"Calving season is one of my favorite times because of all those new babies. We've been planning for years what that new calf crop is going to be," he says. "So when you go out in the pasture and study the new babies, that's where it all comes together."

Seeing the proof in test herds helps verify the plan.

"We had customers that were figuring out they needed to differentiate their product and we had a desire to try and make a positive impact by breeding cattle that were superior carcass cattle, but really had all the good things that we need to have for good range cattle," Stevenson says. He credits those herds with helping him turn in thousands of carcass records over the years. "They rely on us, and we rely on them, and together we have really made progress."

This September, Basin Angus received the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand 2017 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award for those long-term relationships, and the drive to produce genetics that work for every segment of the beef business.

**Customer experience**

Customer Matt Blackford ranches in the Nebraska Sandhills near Brownlee. He returned to the family operation in 2014 and often looks to Stevenson for advice.

"Dad has built a herd that had done really well carcass-wise, and some really good females, the broad spectrum," the commercial cattleman says. "Doug's helped us make those decisions and know where to go next, so that I don't mess up what my dad built."

The same two feedyards routinely buy the calves and often share carcass data back. That emphasizes why Blackford appreciates the seedstock supplier's foresight on trends.

**Breeders' favorites**

A cattleman often knows his animals better than anyone else.

That idea fueled the creation of ORigen, a breeder-owned bull stud born 17 years ago. Doug Stevenson of Basin Angus Ranch was a founding member.

"We have impacted the way semen was marketed in the industry and given breeders more control in how their cattle are promoted," Stevenson says. It allows breeders to identify sires that they think are standouts from their own herds.

"Without ORigen, [Basin Payweight 1682] would probably not have gotten established in the market. It would have taken a long time to prove to everybody what he was," the rancher says.

Stevenson currently chairs the company's board of directors.

It's a ranch-style ambiance where breed-leading excellence meets business as usual: All the Basin bulls collected for ORigen also go out for natural service in the herd.



► "It's been a long-term approach that it's taken," says Doug Stevenson. "We've been very fortunate to end up with some cattle that rank at levels that most people would call extremes on the carcass traits, but we didn't do it by chasing the extremes."

"By the time you get that data back, you already have bulls turned out," he says, but relying on the breeder's advice helps him plan.

"Anybody who tells you they're not worried about what the next guy is going to do hasn't been at it for very many years, because, boy, the only way you're going to sell calves next year is how good they did this year," the rancher says.

To the west, Jordan Willis at Cokeville, Wyo., is back on his home ranch and continues a tradition his dad started decades ago: buying Basin bulls.

"We want the all-around kind of bulls that are good in every trait," he says, noting they sell steer calves at weaning and develop heifers for themselves and commercial buyers.

That's what led the Willis family to Basin. They stay because of the continual improvement and supply of uniform sires. The family buys 25 bulls a year — many half- or full-brothers — then sells all the March- and April-born calves in one draft on video auction.

"We can do that because of the uniformity," Willis says. "They know what we need for our ranch and to make us successful."

Stevenson couldn't script a better testimony. That's the heart of his program, and it's a continuation of the family legacy.

**Family business**

Wayne Stevenson has been gone 23 years, but his influence is everywhere.

“He instilled in me the idea that we raise cattle for, and sell to the people we sell to, because we’re friends with those people. We like our customers, and we want them to do well,” Stevenson says. “It’s not great marketing. It’s trying to make a great product and present it honestly and have long-term trust and commitment.”

As a preteen, Stevenson was selling private-treaty bulls, and before he left for college, the young producer tried his hand at breeding decisions.

“His dad was always a teacher,” Sharon says. “Anytime he did anything, he would explain why he was doing it.”

But instinct, the kind that kept Basin Payweight 1682 from just being another carcass in the cooler, can’t be taught. The fact that he’s sired 150 bulls in the “new” Basin herd? Well, perhaps there’s a bit of the mentor’s influence there, too.

“Divine intervention,” Sharon says. “It’s like his dad was smiling down on us.”



**Editor’s Note:** *Miranda Reiman is director of producer communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*



► As Doug and Sharon Stevenson look to the future, it includes leaving a legacy for their three daughters to carry on. Oldest daughter Brittany Berg and her husband Trevor (pictured center) are already involved with day-to-day operations on the ranch.