

Angus genetics play key role in direct marketing for Crooked Creek Beef.

Story & photos by Joann Pipkin

A self-described urban rat, Bill McLaren has cornered the market on direct product marketing, adding value to his beef operation long before it was cool.

McLaren, along with his wife, Linda, has had an interest in direct product marketing for more than 20 years. Little more than a stone's throw from the Saint Louis County line, the McLarens have taken their Crooked Creek Beef straight off the farm and into the homes and fine restaurants of beef-eating consumers in and around the gateway city. With the tagline "From conception to consumption," the McLarens realize the value of Angus genetics in their quest to provide customers with a good eating experience.

Learning the process

Back in the mid 1990s, the McLarens were among the first in the nation trying to sell premium pork to consumers. McLaren says they even traveled to Washington, D.C., to get a label and operating protocol to market their product.

However, direct marketing then was a different bird than it is today — and McLaren says it's been a learning process.

The McLarens sold both beef and pork until about 2000, when the hog market took a dive. Now totally a beef operation, McLaren recognizes the impact quality genetics has on his end product.

"[The American Angus Association] has done such a wonderful job with EPDs (expected progeny differences), and as we have progressed, our emphasis has changed," McLaren says. "We really need to worry about the end product. The cow-calf man really needs to worry about the genetics of his end product because ultimately those dollars are going to come back, or not come back, to him."

Laying the foundation

Having raised cattle growing up, McLaren was no stranger to the beef business. Still, he needed to fine-tune his knowledge, establishing set spring and fall calving seasons for his 120-head operation.

Today, about 50% of McLaren's herd is composed of granddaughters of N-Bar Emulation EXT. Cows are



From Conception

► **Above:** The Angus toolbox is big, and it's deep, says Bill McLaren. "The Angus breed is looking from start to finish at economically important traits, and they're making those traits available for me as an end user."

bred using timed artificial insemination (AI) to Angus sires. Purchasing herd sires backed by performance testing is important to the McLarens.

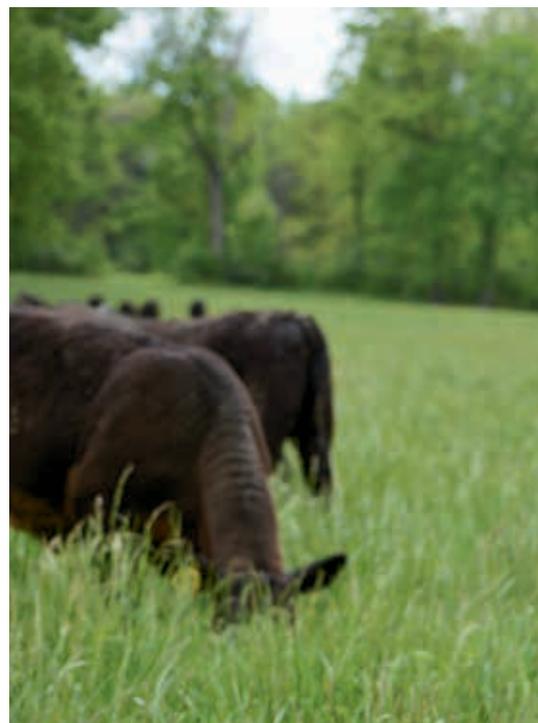
"I've only bought two bulls that weren't performance tested in my life, and that was probably three years of the worst mistakes that I have made, just buying them on phenotype," McLaren says.

McLaren has purchased a number of herd sires from Circle A Ranch, taking advantage of their feeder-calf program, which provided feedlot data. The move helped McLaren identify valuable genetic traits for his business direct-marketing beef.

While birth weight, calving ease, weaning weight, yearling weight, milk, intramuscular fat and ribeye are important selection indicators for McLaren, he also looks closely at docility and dollar energy (\$EN).

"We have to worry about our end consumer, so we've selected for maternal traits, then we went to carcass traits, and now we're on to dollar energy and dollar beef," he says.

The Angus toolbox is big, and it's deep, says McLaren.



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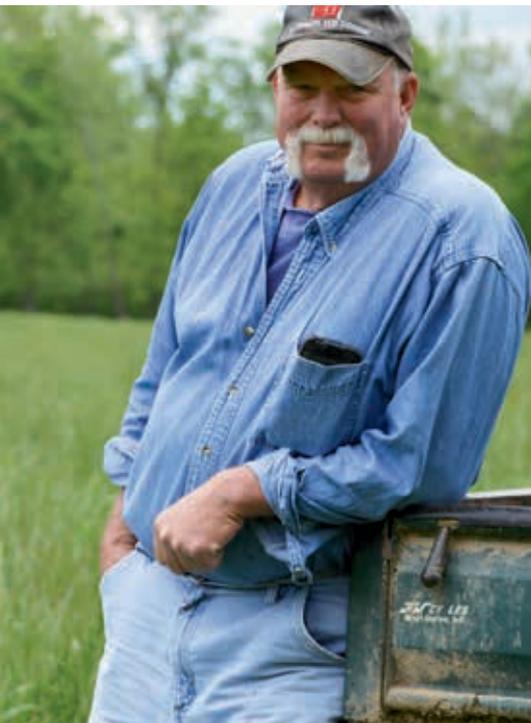
Even though genetics are important to McLaren, the entrepreneur has discovered the role environment plays in his operation.

"We want to be in control of our animals from the day they're conceived until that day they go to the processor for consumption,"





to Consumption



► **Above:** McLaren's Crooked Creek Beef processes between 50 and 75 head of cattle each year. Meat is sold as halves, quarters and individual cuts through farmers' markets and directly off the farm.

► **Left:** "We feed less than 10% corn in our creep feed and finishing ration," McLaren says. "We're feeding a low-starch, high-quality fiber diet."

McLaren explains. "I've become very interested in fetal programming."

Says McLaren, "If I want to sell a calf that's going to have a big ribeye and a big IMF (intramuscular fat) with a quality eating experience, that cow needs to make sure it's got enough groceries in the first and second trimester."

A firm believer that the animal can turn low-quality cellulose into high-quality

protein, McLaren provides good grass to his cattle first.

A commodity mix composed of wheat midds, distillers' grains, corn gluten, soy and cottonseed hulls, and corn serves as the base for McLaren's creep feed and finishing ration.

"We feed less than 10% corn in our creep feed and finishing ration," McLaren says. "We're feeding a low-starch, high-quality fiber diet."

McLaren strives for an animal that weighs 1,300 pounds (lb.) at about 13 months old, when it is harvested. Carcass weights average in the upper 700- to lower 800-lb. range.

The top 50% of heifers are kept for replacements with the remainder fed out along with their steer mates. McLaren aims for 4 lb. of gain per day for feedlot steers and heifers and 2 lb. of gain per day for herd replacements.

Building the business

Beginning with the end in mind, McLaren says the key to building his beef business is in

knowing what his end product is going to be.

Once that is established, he says identifying a processor to work with comes next.

"Having somebody that's willing to do what you want and do it in volume is a difficult thing," McLaren says. "They're your partner. If you're selling a side or a quarter of beef, and it doesn't get cut up right, I get the phone call. And I've got to figure out what to do to make that customer happy."

McLaren calls the processor the "Christmas bow and wrapping paper" on your product. "That Christmas bow means an awful lot about the customer being happy."

After establishing who his processor would be, McLaren says he had to determine how to feed and manage groups of cattle, as well as balance desired genetic traits to produce a product that would deliver a quality eating experience and bring customers back over and over again.

"It takes time to grow into it," McLaren says. "The hardest thing is to grow into your demand. You have to try and anticipate what your demand is going to be two years ahead of time."

McLaren's Crooked Creek Beef processes between 50 and 75 head of cattle each year. Meat is sold as halves, quarters and individual cuts through farmers' markets and directly off the farm. Additionally, four Saint Louis area restaurants feature it on their menu.

"The cuts are the hardest part," McLaren explains. "Sixty percent of a beef animal is hamburger, and 20% of it is really high-quality steak. Then you've got the other 20% in between that you've got to teach your consumer how to prepare."

Finding a restaurant that wants to feature locally produced beef is key, McLaren says, because it's difficult to compete on price.

"You have to be willing to partner [with the restaurant]," he explains. "You have to

educate them about the economics, and you have to sell every piece of meat."

Matching production to demand has been perhaps the tallest hurdle for McLaren to clear. "We don't have the option to buy a lot more real estate," McLaren says. "We

don't have the option to rent a lot more real estate, so we have to figure out how we can add value in our environment."

"If we've got something to hide, then we don't need to be doing this."

— **Bill McLaren**

Sharing the story

Telling the story of beef is an integral part of McLaren's business. In fact, it's helped him grow his operation.

"We work with the [Missouri Beef Industry Council], doing two or three events each year with them," McLaren explains.

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“We’re doing an event this year with Missouri Farmer’s Care for grade-school teachers, and we work with Farm Bureau, and the Girl and Boy Scouts.” They also host a farm day for a neighboring subdivision.

A graduate of the Masters of Beef Advocacy program through the National Beef Checkoff Program, McLaren says it’s easy to talk to other farmers about the beef business, but it’s harder to communicate with a consumer.

“We have to not be afraid of the word sustainability,” he says. “We have to be able to explain to people why we’re sustainable, how we’re taking sunshine and grass and turning them into protein.”

Plus, he says, sustainability begins with

being able to make a profit.

“I tell people they can come any day,” McLaren says. “They may be out here on a train wreck, but I’m willing to let somebody see what’s going on. If we’ve got something to hide, then we don’t need to be doing this.”

McLaren says when they first began direct-marketing their beef, they thought the business should target consumers with a high disposable income.

“That business model doesn’t work,” he says. “It’s amazing. The people that are most interested are 35 years old and have two kids. They want their children to have a little experience knowing where their food comes from and to understand that it’s not just from a grocery store.”

Social media and a farm website also help the McLarens market their product and share their story.

“We have to work to make sure as an industry that our end product is something that every single one of us would have our name on,” McLaren says. “The beef industry is not going to be the way it has been for the last two years. So, we’re going to have to go back and put our work gloves on and make sure our consumer knows that they’re going to get a quality experience every time they have beef for dinner.”



Editor’s Note: Joann Pipkin is a cattlemaster and freelancer from Republic, Mo.