

CATTLEMEN SPEAK OUT

Increasing size in Angus cattle is an often-discussed issue these days. Here four men representing different types of operations offer their opinions and concerns.

Jack Blum

Jack Blum and his wife Jeanne entered the Angus business 10 years ago with a farm in Wytheville, Va. In 1977 the operation—Fairfield Farms—was moved to Lakeville, Conn., where the Blums and manager Guy Johnson now run 75 brood cows and have a small experimental embryo transplant component. Fairfield Hi Guy, a bull who has seen success in the show ring this past year, was calved at Fairfield.

From his point of view, Blum believes increased size in cattle is not inherently undesirable; in fact, so long as negative traits don't accompany it, he sees increased size as a valid breeding objective.

He writes: "Studies have demonstrated that the proportions of fat, bone and meat-producing muscle tissue remain constant in cattle of varying mature size. This argues for structurally bigger animals as a commercial objective provided that size does not produce demonstrable loss of desirable traits in breeding animals—such as decline in fertility, calving ability, milking ability and soundness.

"The national Angus herd is still composed on the average of small enough cows to make 'changer' bulls—those which will sire greater frame—a desirable economic objective for the small seed stock producer. Many of the super calves seem to come from cows that are only slightly above average in size themselves but have consistently big Angus cattle in their genetic heritage. It is these growth producers that we aim for in our own breeding herd—not the female which has gotten big by breeding late, calving every other year and keeping the value of the feed she consumes to herself.

"For me, the jury is still out on the calves produced by the cow that mothers size. If these sons and daughters can transmit their frame without transmitting offsetting negative traits, their dams should stay as foundation cows. In this context, size remains a valid breeding objective to us."

Jerry Fitzgerald

Windy Acres Angus general manager Jerry Fitzgerald, Harrison, Neb., writes:

"The question of size is certainly a loaded

one—right now there are about as many pros and cons about size as there are about what to do with the problem of inflation.

"Many purebred breeders maintain that we must keep on making Angus bigger. They think that in order to stay ahead of all other breeds we must keep on making Angus taller. But tall in itself is not size—size includes the measurement of height but it also includes length, thickness and total pounds. We all strive to incorporate these traits in our cattle, but all too often we use the height measurement as the only criteria.

"One of the things that upsets me most is that every 'professional' can tell me how tall a bull, heifer or cow should be at every stage of its life. They've measured and checked and talked on the phone about not how good an individual is but how tall he or she is. These same professionals cannot, however, tell me how long or thick that same individual is. Now I realize it is easier to measure height because we have some place to start and we don't on the other two measurements.

"The measurements that make pounds—the way we sell some 97% of the entire cattle population—are length and thickness. Perhaps in our quest for more height we have changed the shapes of skeletons on our cattle and perhaps have not increased total pounds as much as we have increased total height—we certainly have more straight-shouldered cattle than we did a few years ago. I believe this change also has had to do with the increased lack of soundness in some of our bigger cattle.

"Now I believe increased size in Angus cattle is good if we do not forget what our breed is, what it is noted for and the importance that it carries in the entire industry.

"Certainly quality is very important, and it's something that no one talks about, perhaps because we take it for granted within our breed. One of the main reasons many of the exotic breeders have incorporated Angus or Angus-cross cows in their programs is they know that Angus have quality throughout and carcass quality in particular, and it is very important for them to have cattle and carcasses that make consistent quality grade.

"Well, if we continue to increase size, can we maintain our quality? It is a question I

can't answer, but if we cannot maintain quality, then these same breeders with exotics will no longer need us.

"Fertility is probably the most important attribute we have. The best bull and best cow in the world cannot have the best calf if one of them is infertile. As we continue to go for more size, picking cattle for longer bone growth, are we also picking traits that we know go hand-in-hand with infertility? It has been shown that if one of two identical twin bull calves is castrated, the steer will have longer bone growth than the one left a bull. If we continue to go bigger, will we lose fertility in Angus, the same fertility that some of the larger breeds wish they had and are working so hard to place back in their breeds?

"We already may be seeing some decline of fertility in our breed, as we hear of more heifers being calved at three because they were slow in cycling and could not be bred to calve at two.

"Along with fertility we must consider the economics of feeding these larger cattle. If we are to calve heifers as 2-year-olds, can they continue to grow, function and breed back so they calve again in 12 months under normal conditions regardless of what those conditions may be in your country? Should we make these heifers so big with a longer growth curve that it will take extra feed before they will perform as we wish?

"I also believe that ease of calving within the Angus breed is important, and while they say that birth weight is not highly heritable, it is the trait our commercial bull buyers ask most about. I know that there has been much discussion about calving weight, but if we make our breed as big as the exotics—and it seems a chosen few are trying to do just that—then do we get into the same calving problems exotics have, which would certainly cause us to lose our advantage in selling Angus bulls?

"As size increases in our cattle, can we also lose efficiency? Can we make them so big it costs more for maintenance than it does for gain?

"In our cow herd at Windy Acres, we weigh all the cows the day we wean their calves. (We feel at this time they should be closer in condition than at any other during the year.) We use this to check the efficiency of the cow—the pounds of calf she raised

against her own weight. We have found two things. It takes a pretty good 1,050-lb. cow to wean half her body weight. It also takes a pretty good 1,400-lb. cow to do the same. But we do have a large number of 1,150-1,250-lb. cows who wean over 50% of their weight at 205 days each year under range conditions. These are the cows that breed back easily and have a calf every 12 months.

"I believe that the 1,050-lb. cow can milk herself down so much that she cannot function, i.e., breed back, maintain herself and her calf. I also believe that a 1,400-lb. cow cannot function in our country consistently because she cannot maintain both herself and her calf. I am not saying that a 1,200-lb. cow in just good condition is the right weight cow for everyone, but she is the cow that is the easiest and cheapest for me to run in our country and climate year-round.

"If we continue to increase frame, then we must increase weight, and in much of the west (where there are the most cows) I believe the law of diminishing returns comes into effect and will dictate the size that is most functional. I also believe steers which have to be taken to 1,400 lb. to grade are not what the feedlot operators really care to have either. Efficiency and the economics of putting on quality pounds are most important to these people, and most lots are demanding (if they can they can get them) at least 70% black cattle.

"I am not trying to answer the question of size and how big cattle should get for the entire Angus industry. I am, as this part of the magazine requests, offering food for thought.

"I know that 97% of the cattle raised in the U.S. are commercial cattle, and it seems to me to find out what we should produce we should ask these producers what they want and then try our best to produce it. These are the people who have only one crop a year—cattle. They pay their bills, buy new cars and pickups, send their kids to school and build mother a new house with the proceeds from that crop—and have done it successfully since the first cows were here.

"Our commercial customers tell us they don't want short bulls. By short they do not mean low set but short; they want length. They also want thickness, capacity to convert grass and roughage, sound feet and legs, fertility, a good hair coat, ease of calving, pounds to sell, eye appeal and good disposition. I have *never* had a commercial

man ask me for the *tallest* bull I raised this year.

"In summary, I need as much size as I can get—providing the cattle are good first. We must incorporate all the dimensions—length, thickness and height. We must maintain quality, fertility, calving ease, efficiency and meet the demands of our customers. If you as a breeder can sell all your cattle by the inch, then height for the sake of all else is your answer; but if your customers are those who sell their cattle by the pound like those 97%, then size must be incorporated as a compatible partner with every other desirable trait in your program."

Dick Mercer

"When you have a commercial man come up to you and say, 'You purebred breeders are getting these bulls too big,' that's when you really start thinking about size," says Dick Mercer of Big Sky Angus Ranch, Lavina, Mont.

Mercer's purebred operation is located in range country where cattle are not likely to be pampered or receive extra feed or extra care. It's country where registered breeders make their living selling bulls to commercial breeders.

Recently Mercer had not one but several commercial breeders express concern to him about increasing size in cattle. Their concern specifically is higher birth weights; they've had some calving problems. And some of these commercial breeders are the same ones who had exotics, then left them because of those problems. "We had better watch it," Mercer says, "or they could be leaving us."

Not too long ago, he adds, he visited with a man looking for bulls to use on heifers. Last spring this man calved out 90 Angus heifers bred to Angus bulls—he had to pull 48 of the calves. And most of them, he claimed, were hard pulls; eight, in fact, required cesareans. The man relegated the responsible bulls to baloney and was looking for replacements. He was not happy. And according to Mercer, he's not alone. "Right now," Mercer says, "if I could guarantee 60-lb. birth weights, I could sell all the bulls I could raise."

And increased birth weights aren't the only problem associated with increasing size in cattle. This past year, Mercer points out, eastern Montana and surrounding areas were dry. And last fall many cat-

tleman found that their bigger cows were not bred back. Nutrition had been so limited that larger cows had to use whatever they consumed simply to support their body weight.

Mercer goes on to tell about a commercial breeder whose 1,000 range-raised cows—at 1,000-1,100 lb.—are as big as he wants them. These cows pretty much fend for themselves summer and winter, and they not only survive, they produce calves.

In his own herd, Mercer says, the bigger cows are not necessarily those producing the bigger or better calves. In fact, he claims, because they weren't producing he had to take some of those big attractive cows to the local auction recently. And three years ago during another dry spell he did the same with 33 head representing two popular bloodlines. These were the herd's biggest cows, he says, and in a dry year their calves averaged 278 lb. as opposed to the 420-lb. average. He couldn't afford to keep them.

Not that there's anything inherently wrong with increasing size, Mercer says. He acknowledges a need for bigger cattle to cross on those still unacceptably small by today's standards. He's not recommending small bulls; bulls, he feels, have to be decent size. But purebred breeders can't afford to be complacent about cows that won't produce. They can't afford to be complacent about calving problems. And he says they'd better be thinking about the relationship between those problems and increasing size.

Dan Scott

What's the commercial breeder think about size? Here's one man's opinion.

"Our challenge is to find cattle that have a good weaning index, that grow out well as yearlings and perform in the feedlot. But we can't have abnormally large calves at birth," says Dan Scott of Padlock Ranch.

With headquarters near Sheridan, Wyo., the ranch lies on the Montana-Wyoming border where 9,000 head—primarily Herefords—are calved out each year. Padlock Ranch uses some Angus bulls but on heifers only—roughly 1,500 of them. And although all 2-year-olds are shed-calved and there's a round-the-clock calving crew, problems are anything but welcome. That's why Scott doesn't want to see birth weights much over 75 lb.

There have been some problems. "We

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went the wrong way and had some calving problems several years ago, but the bulls responsible have been replaced and we're having better luck now." And he adds that the kind of bulls he needs are available; there are plenty of bulls around who will sire light birth weights. It's a matter of selection. And Scott admits he has to be a little more careful than he used to be, because some purebred breeders (in their quest for size in their cattle) have forgotten to consider birth weights in their breeding programs.

But he believes purebred breeders are on the right track. They are, he says, actually more concerned with things like fertility and calving ease now than they were five years ago. That's why he doesn't really anticipate many future problems getting the bulls he needs.

Scott says he relies on Angus breeders for help in bull selection; he tries to buy from people who have watched birth weights and whose bloodlines are known for easy calving characteristics. And he says he finds himself buying from the same breeders year after year.

Much of Padlock Ranch's Angus breeding is done A.I., and when he comes across an easy-calving bull, Scott tends to stick with him. (In fact, he stored 15,000 amps of semen a few years back from a bull who suited his purposes.)

Environment, incidentally, determines Padlock Ranch cow size. Scott explains, "Our pasture conditions limit nutrition. And because our cows calve as 2-year-olds and every year thereafter, they never have a chance to reach their maximum growth. The cows top out at 1,050 lb. That's about all our range grasses and our hard winters will allow them to do when they are raising a calf every year."

Even so, Scott says, "We need the genes for frame and size that give calves a chance to grow out when nutrition is available in the feedlot or in a growing program."

So for this commercial breeder, birth weights are crucial. But so, too, is a calf's ability to grow once it hits the ground. The challenge to the purebred breeder here, then, is to produce seed stock that will in turn produce calves with light birth weights but with frame and ability to grow. 