

# Where is The Registered Livestock Industry Heading Today?

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I shall begin by admitting that I have only been a registered livestock breeder for approximately 17 years and do not profess to know everything there is to know about cattle. I will quickly add that I began my career as a registered breeder in 1968 at a time when commercial cattlemen, back-grounders, feedlot operators and packing plant operators were speaking out about the seed stock industry's sad state of affairs.

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Back then it all made sense. The commercial cow man wanted bulls that would sire heavier steer calves and heifer calves that would grow up to be heavy-milking, fertile cows. The back-grounder wanted calves that would add frame and pounds quickly. The feedlot operator wanted yearlings that would have enough frame to gain rapidly and efficiently, and grade Choice. The packer wanted high yielding carcasses that would grade Choice. It really seemed so simple that I could not fully understand how purebred breeders of that era could have gotten so far out of step with the commercial beef industry.

It seems that in the 1950s and 1960s it was quite stylish to have beautiful, highly improved stock farms with miles of pretty board fences and elegant barns. The cattle were highly pampered; show calves were identified at an early age and force fed with nurse cows and grain; the race was on for the most compact, thickest animal possible because that's the way they were judged at the shows; and, as is always the case,

the show winners were the "hot" items that brought in the big dollars. In those days production records and performance records were the exception rather than the rule. It seemed a significant number of females on the market were far from being top-milking, fertile cattle. In short, practically all touch with reality, as it pertains to efficient beef production, had been lost.

The major sales effort by all concerned—the media, the judges, the sales managers, the commission men and the breeders—was focused on the show winners and their close relatives. Almost everyone that entered the business in that era invested in such cattle and lived by the "gospel," not knowing that their industry was on the wrong course and heading further out to sea.

## **One extreme to the other**

In the very late 1960s it became apparent to a few leaders that we had gone too far and a reversal of the trend was eminent. In less than two years the pendulum shifted. No longer was it in vogue to visit the fancy farms in search of seed stock. Instead it was almost a detriment to have some of the old line prefixes that stemmed from these highly promoted trend-setting establishments of the old days because the cattle that stocked them were hopelessly out-dated.

The new fad was to go to the practically run establishments where the commercial man dictated the type of cattle bred. A breeder would go to one of these "practical" ranches and find calf crops where individuals were given an equal chance to rise to the top without nurse cows, where meaningful production records and performance data were kept and where cows were maintained predominantly on grass without a lot of pampering. Many times young bulls purchased "out of the pasture" proved to be better sires than calves that were being shown because they would come a lot closer to reproducing themselves than calves that had

been thoroughly pampered.

As the trend toward bigger-framed cattle with solid performance figures progressed, the show ring cattle and the cattle needed in the commercial industry were amazingly alike in kind. There were a lot of different modern bloodlines available that when blended produced an almost ideal type. Breeders had a broad range of opinion regarding what lines would work, resulting in many popular lines of cattle. It was a very healthy era for the purebred industry.

Where do we stand today? I have visited with many purebred breeders who feel we are exactly where we were in the 1960s, but at the extreme other end of the pendulum. The performance records and production records on many of the most popular cattle are beginning to lose credibility and usefulness; we are pampering our cows; we are force feeding our top calves from an early age with nurse cows and all the grain they will consume; we are back to considering herd additions that are basically highly fitted cattle and ignoring the solid ranch-raised cattle. We base our breeding decisions on show

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ring accomplishments which are the results of this pampering in the race toward the tallest creature we can raise. The sales people can sell show ring results the easiest, so who can blame them for peddling that which takes the least selling effort.

## **Effects magnified**

To further intensify the problem of the 1950s and 1960s, we now have

open artificial insemination and embryo transplant. These two great advances in livestock breeding have given us the means to make changes much more rapidly, for good or for bad. They have also led us to narrowing the "popular" genetic base to a very few bulls and a handful of cow families. In some cases we don't know nearly enough about these elite bulls or cows to entrust the future of our breed to them. We could very well be breeding some very important traits out of the breed and not even know we are doing it.

From an economic standpoint, the course we are currently following could very well lead to a massive reduction in the size of the registered Angus population in the United States. The leaders in the breed surely can profit from embryo transplant and a very few breeders will continue to profit from extensive embryo transplant. It must be recognized, however, that as in any other business when too many folks start doing the same thing, there will eventually be an "overkill" and a good many folks will come up losers. In my home town one only has to look at the real estate business. Office buildings, apartments, shopping centers and distribution centers—they all were the hot things to build for a while, but eventually the developers overdid it. Many go bankrupt when the supply exceeds demand.

The Angus breed can only absorb the production of so many embryo transplant programs before the market weakens and the practice becomes uneconomical. There are probably a lot of folks using embryo transplant extensively that shouldn't be. They are only doing it because it seems to be in style due to a very few success stories. With the exception of a few breeders, many who entered heavily into embryo transplant have dispersed.

### **Economics must dictate**

Eventually everything gets back to economics. The cost of running an embryo transplant program of only moderate size is quite high if one considers the high level of nutrition required, the extra management, the extra labor, the number of open recipients one must carry through a year, the technician cost and the donor cost. One can get a lot of money invested very quickly into a seven- to 10-cow donor program.

As we head into an era when we are at the other end of the pendulum, one must be cognizant of the impact a shift in cattle type would have on a newly

started transplant program that is strictly based on the race for the top of the show cattle circuit. Certainly much highly regarded research data indicates that we are drawing very near to this shift in cattle type.

As mentioned earlier, we must realize the easiest cattle to promote and

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sell are show cattle. The females that are shown are fitted for a long period of time, flushed, and calved at 3 years of age. We measure them at 3 and 4 years of age to determine if they are suitable to be the dams of our show prospects. Consider the difference in size between a 4-year-old cow that has worked hard on minimum feed and weaned three calves, and a 4-year-old cow that has been fed most of her life and only has weaned one calf. You can

bet the female that has been out in the pasture working will not be nearly as big. We should question if some of these donor cows are much bigger genetically than a lot of the better working cows.

The time is near when we will rediscover the \$2,000 to \$5,000 cow that has a proven production record. We will again learn that these cows that don't spend too many open days in their lives and don't need to be hand fed every day are really much more economical than those in our recipient herds. We will realize that even with embryo transplant, we still only have a few bulls that are the show winners (just like we had prior to E.T.) and only a few females that are the show stoppers, but we are spending much more to produce them. We'll realize that if everyone goes to embryo transplant we'll never get them all to look alike.

We Americans have always been known for "keeping up with the Joneses." Well, that is exactly what we as breeders of purebred livestock are doing and unfortunately in the very near future we will pay the price. Then we'll go back to predominantly maintaining quality herds of cattle that develop the traits believed in by individual

breeders. Most of us will attend sales looking for a few females each year that possess those traits that we need at that time, instead of playing the "hit parade" game of buying a handful of heifers we hear are the stars of the class while supporting the burnt out dairy cow market and the commercial cow cull market.

### **The "real world" is important**

Keep in mind that embryo transplant and the show ring have been good to Windy Acres and I am not writing with a sour grapes attitude. I truly believe that very limited embryo transplant is desirable and that the great majority of Angus cattle should be raised the old-fashioned way with only the elite individuals that excel in peer groups raised under practical conditions used in small but select transplant programs.

I have been in the Angus business for the long pull and I want to continue for years to come. I think it will be extremely difficult to maintain a long-term program with a brood cow herd if current trends persist.

We all need to take a step back and take a long look at what we are doing. Are we operating in the most economical manner and catering to the market that eventually determines whether our breed lives or dies? If we don't think that satisfying the real needs of the commercial cattle market are important, maybe we should be raising show dogs. The cattle breeds that have chosen not to listen to the commercial cattle industry over the years have usually all but faded away and found that coming back into a popular role is a long hard process.

Please don't take me wrong when I mention fancy places, show herds and excessive management. All of us certainly have the option to have a nice, highly decorated place. We all must take proper care of our cattle and without a doubt the show ring is one of the best places in the world to show off our product. I feel strongly, however, that when we consider buying breeding stock, we should analyze the level of management exercised in raising the cattle we are evaluating. And we always should attempt to determine if the cattle we are evaluating are in touch with the real world of the commercial cattleman. If we are prudent, and maintain contact with the commercial market and its requirements while maintaining economy in our own operations, the Angus breed will thrive for many years to come. AJ