



CINDY FOLCH PHOTOS

WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER

This is one of Amanda Powell's basic management philosophies in her Angus and AI business.

by Cindy Folch



Wearing coveralls and boots and flanked by a four-year-old chore hand, Amanda Powell is ready to start her day. This may not be the picture you have in mind for a successful entrepreneur and hard-working farm manager, but Powell fits both descriptions.

Powell and her husband, Doug, own and operate Oak Row Farm, a small, purebred Angus operation near Saranac, Mich., in Ionia County. Doug works full-time as a vice president at Poultry Management Systems developing environment control units for large poultry complexes around the world. Because of his busy schedule, Amanda assumes the bulk of the farm management.

But her work extends past the farm. She owns and operates AI Technical Services, an independent artificial insemination (AI) service for beef and dairy producers. In addition to breeding the cows for customers, Amanda also helps them select bulls and develop a breeding program. She breeds about 1,500 cows a year and has a list of 100 clients.

Amanda's constant companion is her young son, Ryan. He even accompanies her on farm visits to breed cattle. "Ryan has gone with me since he was two weeks

Continued on page 155

(above) Amanda Powell keeps very busy managing Oak Row Farms and running her AI business. Even with her hectic schedule, son Ryan is always at her side.

(left) Oak Row Farms has a peaceful setting just outside of Saranac, Mich., in Ionia County. The farm boasts a small but quality herd of Angus cattle.

Continued from page 152

old," says Powell. "He took his naps in the car and when we would get home he would wake up." Having Ryan with her has been special and she wouldn't have changed a thing.

The Powells have only 12 cows, which may seem small in view of much larger purebred herds. Amanda contends that size is not the important factor in a herd. "Size doesn't determine success as much as quality. If you want cows that genetically have highly saleable calves, you need to confine labor costs," she says.

Powell determined she would rather have a few high quality cows than 50 mediocre cows. This reflects her philosophy that working smarter, not harder, would be more beneficial for their farm.

She is beginning to reap the rewards of her selection and breeding program. Oak Row Farm had the grand champion Angus female at the 1993 Michigan Beef Expo. Powell regularly puts her bulls in the Michigan and Indiana bull tests, where they do consistently well.

The success has been many years in the coming. Amanda began in the Angus business with her first steer when she was 14 and purchased her first heifer in 1974. Her parents always had a few Angus cattle, but the family was very involved in raising, training and showing horses. Amanda's family currently has more than 30 horses and her sisters actively train horses in Michigan and other states. Her background in breeding and training horses has helped her with the cattle. Her husband was raised on a dairy farm and his family has always been known for their Milking Shorthorns. His interest in cattle has also been an asset to the farm.

To start building the farm's herd, Powell says she attended sales and looked for cattle that could become part of her breeding program. "The cows I bought were what I call sleepers," she says.

Amanda would go through the sale catalog and pick out cattle she was interested in based on their bloodlines. Then, she would look at the cattle to see if they met her phenotype criteria. Finally, she would write in her sale catalog the value of those cows and bid only to her predetermined value.

"The ones I got were considered good buys. It took me a longer time to get them," she says. After purchasing the cows, Amanda would keep the better producing cattle and cull the others. The foundation



Amanda Powell and her son, Ryan, check on his heifer calf named Suzy. Amanda describes Ryan as her number one chore boy.

females for the Oak Row herd are Belleau Pride Bl30, purchased from August Busch in Missouri, and Herb Lou Miss Patton from Diubles in Ann Arbor, Mich.

The farm operates on a zero debt load. To buy another piece of equipment or upgrade machinery, they sell some cattle. She says when they first purchased their farm 10 years ago they had to build fences and buildings. To pay for the improvements along the way, they sold cattle out of the herd.

Amanda has begun to advertise the farm to encourage customers to come and view the cattle. She waited to begin advertising until she had what she considered to be quality cattle to sell. "I think when you advertise and when you promote yourself, people remember what you bring," says Amanda. "It's important to have integrity and trust, and you need to keep that reputation."

She advertises in several Michigan publications and the *Angus Journal*. She even did direct mail for two bulls sold through the Michigan bull test. One of the bulls was sold to a commercial breeder who received the direct mail piece. Most of her cattle marketing is done through the Michigan Beef Expo and private treaty at the farm.

Amanda contends that she needs to work smarter, rather than harder, even on her breeding program. "You can't be peddling cows that don't perform," she says. "I don't breed to win at shows . . . customers need cattle that will work in their herd."

Last year, Powell's calves had an average 205-day adjusted weight of 675 pounds for heifers and 736 pounds for bulls. The two bulls, which were twins, went on for a 1,250 pound average adjusted yearling weight. The cow which raised the twin bulls had a -9 expected progeny difference (EPD) for milk. This is just one example that leads Amanda to say there may be too much variation in EPDs to predict any kind of valid performance.

In her work with her own herd, and the breeding in her customer's herd, she has experienced trouble with EPD numbers. She relates that one bull had a 10.6 birthweight EPD, but after being bred to 25 cows, he never sired a calf over 100 pounds. Yet, with a bull that had one-third of that EPD for birthweight, she saw calves that were consistently more than 100 pounds, even to the extreme of 125 pounds.

"Something's better than nothing. But, even with high accuracies there's such a variety and spread," Amanda says. With her work in the dairy industry, she has seen producers who base all their breeding on milk proofs. As with EPDs, she says producers need to take the variables into consideration when making their selection.

Amanda brings her AI expertise to her own herd of Angus cattle. They've never owned a bull and she breeds all the cows by AI. "Reproduction is a genetic variable that you select for. Cows that are hard to take and hard to settle, their daughters are usually hard to settle," she says.

Celebrating the 15th year of her AI business, Amanda began breeding cows

"It doesn't matter if you're 200 pounds or 100 pounds when dealing with cattle."

– Amanda Powell

because no one else in the area was offering the service. She started breeding cows for her parents and expanded to other neighboring herds.

"I have a list of probably 100 clients," says Amanda. "Some of them are the two or three cows a guy has in his backyard and some of them are 150 cow dairy herds." She'll breed about 1,500 cows in a year.

The job is demanding. Amanda breeds cows every day of the year, except for Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter. Ten years ago, she hired her only employee to help breed the cows. With the two women working, they are able to take weekends and vacations. During the busiest times, she'll spend about six hours a day breeding cows, during the morning and evening hours.

Amanda has enjoyed success with her business. She averages 80 percent or better conception rate on her first service. One of the dairy farms she developed the breeding program for has 110 cows and is averaging 70 pounds per cow. It also has

one of the highest milk averages in the area.

Breeding cattle is more than just AI service work. Amanda emphasizes that customers need to buy into the total program. "You have to call me at the right time, be on a good feed schedule, and the reproductive health has to be up to par," she says.

She notes the better managed herds have a better conception rate and better reproductive health in their cattle. She also contends that breeders need to provide the proper nutrition to cattle while they are young to help them reach their full potential.

Attention to detail is very important to this Angus breeder. "Ignorance is not bliss in this industry," she says. In addition to recognizing the various reproductive infections and problems, she can pregnancy check cows at 60 days. A few times farmers have asked her to breed cows that, after checking, she discovered were pregnant. The danger of breeding cows that are already pregnant is an

aborted calf or damaging infections.

Working smarter, not harder, is the basic philosophy Amanda uses both on the farm and in her AI business. "It doesn't matter how big you are. When you are dealing with a 1,500-pound animal it's more restraint — knowing how to restrain them rather than being strong. It doesn't matter if you're 200 pounds or 100 pounds, when you're dealing with something 1,500 pounds, it's all kind of relative. I just run faster."

This cattlemaster's lifestyle may seem busy and hectic. "It's interesting because you're a wife and mother. You have to set your priorities that way. Of course, Ryan goes with me, so I spend a lot of time with him." She and Doug work together on the farm as a team. Amanda says that each of them gives 115 percent.

Even with the busy days and short nights, Amanda enjoys the cattle business. "The people that make up the industry make it special and worthwhile," she says.

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