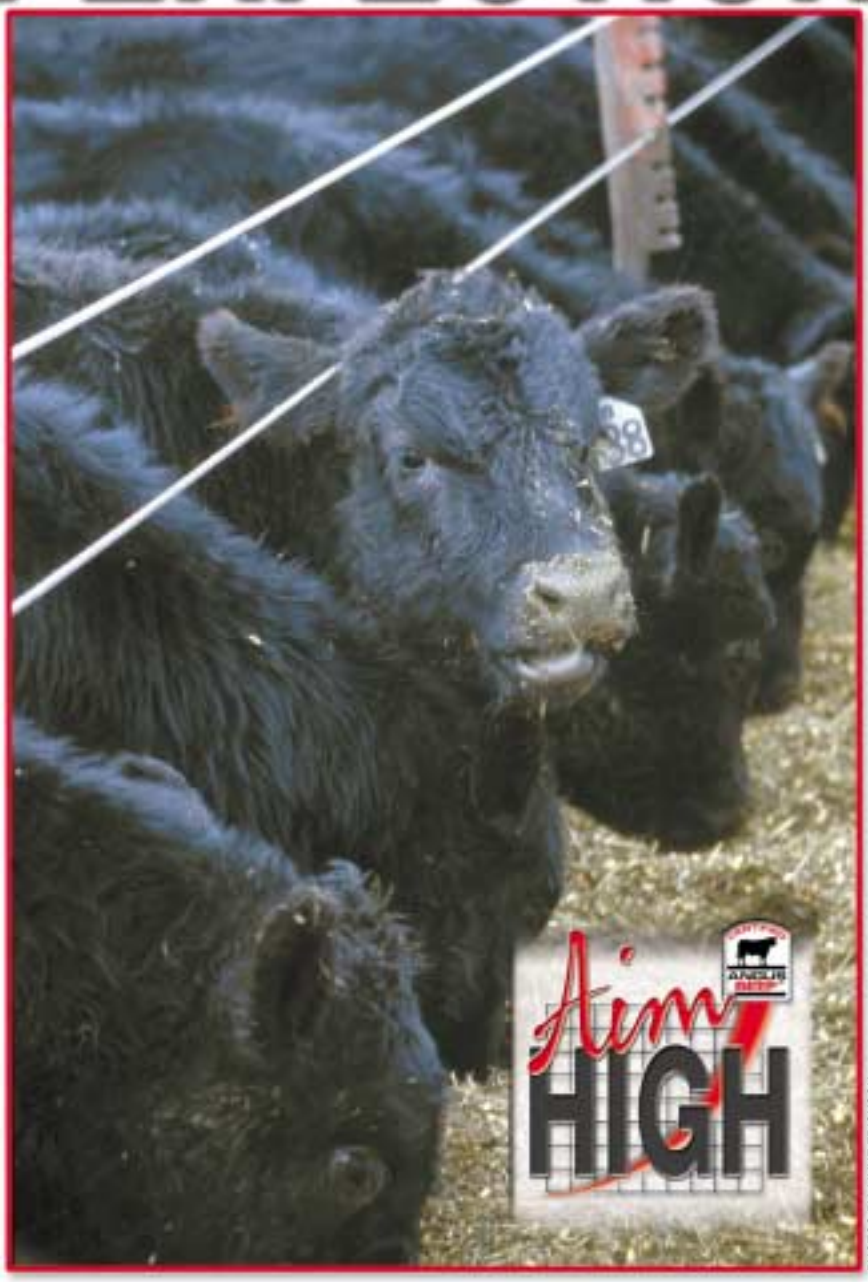
CAB PROGRAM*

Aiming for PERFECTION



PHOTOS BY JAYNE ERICKSON

Mark Namminga's cattle averaged 45% Prime and 97% Yield Grade 3 or better last year. While that pleased him, he's still not satisfied.

BY DEANNA SCRIMGER

Above: The feeding program involves starting cattle right after weaning on bunks with a ground-hay diet. Corn silage, alfalfa haylage and high-moisture corn are incorporated with ground hay into the diets for the growing and finishing phases.

In the sports world, scoring 100 points in a basketball game earns you front-page coverage. It made Wilt Chamberlain a household name. Michael Jordan's six consecutive most-valuable-player (MVP) awards made him a basketball legend. The golf world was turned upside down with 24-year-old Tiger Woods's domination.

Raising cattle that achieve more than four times the national average *Certified Angus Beef* ™ (CAB®) acceptance rate may not make Mark Namminga a cattle industry legend, but it is earning him profits. As a fifth-generation South Dakota rancher, he's reaping the rewards of aiming for perfection.

Namminga farms with his parents, Maxine and Dennis; his wife, Kelly; and his 2-year-old son, Riley. The family operates a diversified farming and ranching operation that uses the rotation of irrigated corn, soybeans and alfalfa to feed and finish cattle.

The ranch, homesteaded in 1873 on the Missouri River brakes near Springfield, S.D., has raised straightbred Angus cattle for nearly 100 years. "The overall balance and good Angus mother cows work well in our environment," Namminga says of their 200-cow herd. "Plus they produce good feedlot steers with carcass performance."

Their success is the result of a carefully executed game plan. Carcass data collection started with the 1993 calf crop. The first set of data revealed a need to improve fat thickness and yield grade, but the quality grade distribution was 13% Prime, 24.7% high-Choice, 34.4% average-Choice, 20.4% low-Choice and 7.5% Select — a benchmark well above industry average. Analyzing that and making adjustments led to grid marketing just two years later.

"You need to know what you have. It's a real gamble to sell on a grid if you don't know what your cattle will do. You have to look closely at your genetics," Namminga says. "We realized we were leaving too much on the table. With high-Prime and *Certified Angus Beef*-type cattle, we've found the right option to reward us for the cattle we are producing."

As a farmer-feeder, Namminga feeds out all of the family's cattle and occasionally buys other calves or develops heifers. Today, all fed cattle are sold on a grid with CAB acceptance as the target.

The nervousness felt while selling cattle on a grid the first time has subsided, and there's now a sense of confidence waiting for the check to arrive. Their 1994 data show an impressive 62% CAB acceptance rate; last year, 85% of 173 cattle hit the CAB target.

Not perfect yet

Namminga's packer has taken notice of his cattle because of how well they have

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graded. Surprised, pleased, but not yet satisfied, Namminga is shooting for perfection. Information is essential in management decisions.

"One year we had a problem with dark cutters," he says. "These two or three head were from the same sire, and those cattle were also a little flighty to work." The semen of the bull was destroyed, and he wasn't used again.

"You can tell which bulls work and which ones don't," Namminga says. The ranch has focused on bull selection and has made significant investments in herd sires and semen purchases.

"Obviously, the easiest way to change genetics is through which bulls you use or don't continue to use. We have been careful to only use bulls with proven, stacked pedigrees and have not had any disasters so far. One year we had a bull on the very bottom of our herd-bull battery produce 16 out of 17 *Certified Angus Beef* carcasses. He was sold and gone before we found this out," Namminga laments.

"With more data, we can see cows with — or without — good carcass calves," he says. Cows have to earn their keep, and that includes carcass grade. Last year a cow was culled for never raising a calf better than a low-Choice. Still, because they are working with such a strong base built over time, they haven't had to cull cows heavily on the basis of carcass performance.

"Just because a cow had a bad calf one year isn't a reason to cull. We only cull a handful a year based on carcass performance."

Winning mix

The herd represents an excellent base, but does the playbook capitalize most on genetics, environment or management? Last year's 173 cattle sold in four loads that averaged 45% Prime while maintaining 0.35 inch (in.) of backfat, 83% Yield Grade (YG) 3, 14% YG 2 and only two discounted carcasses — a YG 4 and a Standard. Ninety-three percent of the cattle received a grid premium. That's a big win, especially with such a high level of Prime and relatively low average backfat measurement.

"Looking at where we were and how far we've come, we've made some genetic improvements," Namminga says. "We are starting to see the benefit of stacking genetics, yet there is still something to management and our feeding program. You also have to look at environment. We had an easy winter last year.

"Although we feed our cattle a little bit longer, we have been able to decrease age at slaughter without negatively affecting carcass quality. Most of our calves are slaughtered at 15 months of age," Namminga explains.

He attributes part of their success to growing all of their own feed and focusing on quality. "Dad's always been a stickler on feed quality. I designed a program seven or eight years ago that's really worked for us." The feeding program involves starting calves right after weaning on bunks with a ground-hay diet. Corn silage, alfalfa haylage and high-moisture corn are incorporated with ground hay into the diets for the growing and finishing phases.

Being a relatively small operation, all the cattle are targeted for the same end point or high-quality grid market. Although the ranch has achieved high levels of Prime, the actual target is CAB acceptance — and the Nammingas have been consistently and increasingly accurate (see chart). The results have sparked carcass data collectors and cattle buyers to call in amazement immediately after the cattle have been harvested.

Management advantage

The Nammingas' management and feeding programs work with both ranch genetics and outside cattle. Even though the cattle buyer questioned their decision, they marketed a set of Continental-cross cattle, background unknown, on a high-quality grid.

"For fun, we ran them through the grid. We received a $42 premium per head, and they graded 93% Choice, 7% Yield Grade 1, 40% Yield Grade 2 and 53% Yield Grade 3," he says.

The management advantage is definitely part of Namminga's first-string lineup. "Feeding our own cattle, we haven't had the weaning problems or sickness with bringing cattle in. We've seen and documented calves that were treated with health problems, and oftentimes they don't grade as well," he explains.

Cattle in the feedlot are implanted once toward the end of the finishing phase. "We try not to be too aggressive to hurt our grading, yet want some of the benefits of implanting. We've worked off advice from an Eastern packer, and it seems to have worked for us," Namminga says.

Sorting is one of the key plays in the game plan. "Our home-raised fed cattle are visually sorted and sent to slaughter at different times instead of all at once. Dad has been feeding and sorting fed cattle for many years," he says.

By looking at growth rates, Namminga says they've been able to decrease the age at which they harvest their cattle. They also closely monitor weaning and yearling weights and fertility.

"Fertility is still your No. 1 deal," he says.

While Mark Namminga is realizing the benefit of stacking genetics, he says environment, management and feeding still play major roles in achieving high levels of CAB® acceptance.

"If the cattle do not breed back, you don't have a calf to feed. We are looking at fertility now more than ever."

Still, their game plan is focused on genetic selection, and they are seeing the results of stacking high-accuracy, carcass-merit bulls in pedigrees. A long-term relationship with Galen and Lori Fink of Manhattan, Kan., as a genetic source has proven successful.

"We are looking for athletic-type bulls with good feet and legs that can travel our rugged brakes and breed large groups of cows in single-sire pastures. Females must be functionally sound, easy-fleshing and able to rebreed and stay in the herd. We've gotten good females from their (the Finks') genetics, as well as superior carcass traits."

The Namminga family operates a diversified farming and ranching operation. Shown are (front row, from left) Kelly, Maxine, (back row, from left) Mark, Riley and Dennis.

Balancing act

When selecting artificial insemination (AI) sires, proven genetics are essential.

"We are not looking for super growth and generally won't use sires with negative marbling EPDs (expected progeny differences). They must have positive scrotal circumference and decent weaning weight EPDs. We look more at yearling weight EPDs since we are keeping our own calves. Moderate birth and fleshing ability must also be there," Namminga explains.

"It's a real balancing act. There are a lot of intriguing young Angus bulls out there right now, but when I apply my selection criteria and take into consideration carcass accuracies and the bull's acceptance with commercial cattlemen, it is usually easy to narrow my short list to eight or 10 bulls for consideration," he adds.

Female performance from the stacked genetics is providing results.

"Calves out of our younger cows with newer genetics excel from a performance standpoint. Our highest weaning weights have been from first-calf heifers," Namminga explains, adding how much he is looking forward to the spring 2001 calf crop from his most stacked set of pedigrees.

Continuing to look at female performance will be a focus for the future. "It makes a big difference to look at income from individual calves based on carcass value. You see which females are producing calves with above-average carcass values," Namminga says. "We expect to see some interesting trends as we continue to track mothers and daughters."

Proof in the progeny

Measuring genetic performance doesn't happen without challenges. Semen is collected from most of their purchased bulls since it takes several years to see the results of breeding decisions.

"It's a cheap insurance policy to have a couple hundred straws in the tank in case something happens to the bull," Namminga says. Although he admits it's a financial commitment, the insurance that those genetics will be available later, after he sees the results of their performance, is worth it.

Namminga has enrolled one bull in structured sire evaluation for carcass merit and is looking to do more such testing. He emphasizes actual carcass data vs. ultrasound data for key information to support genetic decisions. Granted, Namminga has experienced some inconsistency between processing plants and data collectors, and he believes some of the first carcass data overestimated actual ribeye areas. However, he believes there is more potential for inconsistency with ultrasound.

"I've found bulls that work good for us that fall apart in ultrasound sire-EPD search. Also bulls that haven't done well for us have been promoted as positive intramuscular-fat bulls from ultrasound EPDs. It could be a good tool to pick out bulls that we need to progeny test or, potentially, to break bulls into top or bottom categories at sales," explains Namminga. "Still, the actual data is essential. I want to see how they work for our program. Ultrasound may have possibilities; but I'm not sold yet, and I'm not ready to buy a bull or semen based on ultrasound EPDs."

Namminga focuses on continual improvement. This year he's looking at increasing ribeye area. "One goal is to maintain our percent Prime and *Certified Angus Beef* qualifying carcasses while improving the percent Yield Grade 2 carcasses. This spring we will have several AI calves out of proven large-ribeye carcass sires," he says. "Increasing muscling and ribeye area will improve final yield grades. The challenge to making these genetic adjustments is not to compromise the integrity of our cow herd since we raise all of our own replacement heifers."

CAB® acceptance rates, by year

Year	No. of head	% CAB
1994	120	61.7%
1995	111	64.0%
1996	162	62.3%
1997	158	62.7%
1998	51	70.6%
1999	155	84.0%
2000	173	85.0%

The ultimate goal is to increase the Nammingas' own genetically controlled calves to feed. They would like to manage more cows but are currently limited by the amount of available grass, being centrally located in a crop-farming area. They may continue to change the lineup, but their focus on genetic selection is already producing home runs that are beginning to catch the industry's attention — and bring increased premiums to their bottom line. AJ