

Small producers don't have to accept a bleak future of raising commodity cattle in isolated poverty. Seven neighbors in Barren County, Ky., know that now. But with 40-80 cows each, they were concerned about being left behind in the rapidly changing beef industry of the 1990s. Nor did it help that they were associated with the Southeast, which is not known for uniform, healthy, high-quality calves.

Jerry Greer and Richard Brown, Park City, Ky., had cooperated for several years, backgrounding steers at one place and developing heifers at another. Their arrangement served as an inspiration for something bigger. In 1997 they got together over steaks with Larry Watson of Bowling Green, Greg Ritter and David Billingsley of Glasgow, and Sydney Bunnell and Tim Shipley of Cave City.

Friends became economic family that day, forming what could be called a strategic alliance. Commercial ranchers may always consider them "hobby farmers," but there's no law against having fun while you make money. And these guys have fun. They love the cattle business, their families and each other — which may seem to be strange components for a business alliance, but this informal association maintains the balance between the bottom line and the way of life.

"We have no official name," Greg says, "but from time to time we have called ourselves the Barren County Beef Cooperators."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 166



► From left, Richard Brown, Sydney Bunnell, David Billingsley and Greg Ritter joined forces, along with Jerry Greer, Larry Watson and Tim Shipley (not pictured), in 1997 to form a strategic alliance to manage and market their calves for greater value.

Partners, friends & neighbors

A family-style alliance in southern Kentucky shows how small producers can use similar Angus genetics to achieve big-farm goals.

Story & photos by Steve Suther



► From the start, the Barren County Beef Cooperators agreed to purchase and use Angus bulls that were better than breed average for six key traits: birth weight, weaning weight, milk, yearling weight, marbling and ribeye area. Buying above-average bulls let them take advantage of Kentucky "tobacco settlement" funds.



►“The state made money available to cattle producers for genetic improvement as a transition away from growing tobacco,” Greg Ritter explains. “For our county, over a two-year period there was \$175,000 for cost-sharing stock that met genetic requirements.”

“Four or five of us have little feedlots, and we’ll each take one of those sorted groups, maybe 70 head, and grow them up to 700-750 pounds.”

— Greg Ritter



►“As a group, we could tell when our calves came in how much alike they were — or weren’t,” says Sydney Bunnell, further explaining that each group member has the right to veto a calf from being added to a lot.

Each contributes

Tim is the only full-time farmer in the group, but each individual brought something unique to the table. “I find that being in the group we can take advantage of a lot of people’s talents,” Jerry says. “Greg is a great people person, so he gets out and makes the contacts that get our cattle sold. Richard is a great negotiator, so we let him have the final say on price.”

Inadequate marketing opportunity was a strong driver in bringing the group together, Larry says. “At the auctions, they will not even bid on a set of calves that are not weaned and haven’t had their shots. Before we got together, like everyone else, we’d take them to the stockyard where you don’t know where they’re coming from or where they’re going, and where 80%-90% of the feeder cattle in this state sell.”

Larry, who has a doctoral degree in nutrition, helps the group feed uniform, balanced rations that deliver consistent backgrounding gains. “We vote on our health program, order the products, and it’s all there the day we want to use it,” David says.

“There are a lot of little things, little bonuses,” Jerry puts in. “On the other hand, nobody gets to do things exactly the way they want to. It’s a little bit like being married, you need people who will give and take.”

“We never let Sydney do everything he wants to do any one year — or me either,” Richard says. “David’s our AI (artificial insemination) technician, and our EPD (expected progeny difference) expert. Jerry’s a champion roper, but we try not to utilize his ability. We really let Sydney in because he has all the facilities.”

True enough, if you look around Sydney’s 440-acre rolling hills farm you’ll find it well-equipped. He even has the van they use for group travel. “If I don’t have it, I know somebody who’s got it that we can borrow it from — if we need a D8, a track hoe or a crane.”

A paving contractor for 30 years, Sydney was just starting as a “full-time” retiree farmer when the group formed. Besides his 65 cows that are Angus crossed with Senepol, Charolais and a few other breeds, he raises tobacco, alfalfa and corn.

In the late fall, everyone gets together for sorting at his barn, with its 12-foot tub crowding alley, scales and holding pens made out of construction surplus and

arranged with safety in mind.

“Even a 300- to 400-pound calf can hurt you if you don’t have it set up right,” he notes. “I can work my cattle here myself. As you get older, you figure out everything you can to make it easier and safer, always making a place where you can get away from them.”

Day-to-day management choices can make a difference in ease of handling. For instance, the wet Kentucky winters make feeding hay in the pasture impractical.

“Better to put it under a roof and let them come in and eat it,” Sydney says. “They’re used to coming in for hay, so we can run them on through the barn for sorting any time.”

Genetic choices

The members do work cattle by themselves on occasion, but are most likely found working in twos and threes, at each farm, administering those group-purchased vaccines and recording data. From the start, they agreed to purchase and use Angus bulls that were better than breed average for six key traits: birth weight, weaning weight, milk, yearling weight, marbling and ribeye area.

Some of their first bulls came from an Illinois breeder, but for the last several years they have purchased exclusively from Anderson Circle Farms, Harrodsburg, Ky. Buying above-average bulls let them take advantage of Kentucky “tobacco settlement” funds.

Greg explains, “The state made money available to cattle producers for genetic improvement as a transition away from growing tobacco. For our county, over a two-year period there was \$175,000 for cost-sharing stock that met genetic requirements. We were already on that page, so our bull purchases were eligible.”

After five years of selection and working toward quality goals, the 12-sire Angus bull battery posted the EPD and rankings listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Average EPDs of the bulls in the Kentucky group’s bull battery

Trait	Avg. EPD	Ranking
Birth	2.20	Top 35%
Weaning	35	Top 35%
Milk	20	Top 20%
Yearling	68	Top 25%
Marbling	0.23	Top 20%
Ribeye	0.19	Top 40%

Members turn in bulls on the same day in late May, after calving in March and April and compare production notes from fertilizer to haying over the summer. In October they administer preweaning shots, then at least two weeks later they wean, keeping the calves on location two weeks or more before transporting 320-340 calves to Sydney's barn. Each owner's calves bear uniquely colored ear tags.

"That day we commingle cattle is a busy day," Richard says. "Hauling in, weighing, worming, sorting by sex and size, hauling back out. We'll see a few sons and sons-in-law helping that day, a big family affair — my team-roping partner comes out just for the fun of it." If the group expands, they would spread the work over two days.

Backgrounding

"Four or five of us have little feedlots, and we'll each take one of those sorted groups, maybe 70 head, and grow them up to 700-750 pounds," Greg says. "They'll be sorted to within 100 pounds, 50 pounds either side of the average." Order buyers like that. Auction managers are welcome to come courting, too, but lately the order buyers have won the bids except for a couple of trailer loads that don't fit specific groups.

"We have numbers on each one that feeds; if I have 20 of his, 10 of mine and 30 of his, we keep track of how much it costs to feed and what share each has in each group," Richard says. "We settle up and pay the cost, our calves known by ear tags and weighed separately when we sell."

Larry's corn, soybean meal and corn gluten based rations, customized for each farm resource, delivered gains from 2.01 pounds (lb.)/day for heifers to 2.40 lb./day for steers last winter, with costs from \$0.38 to \$0.51/lb. Looking at sales opportunities when placed in the growing programs, the group figures they usually add \$40/head value.

"The greatest advantage is having the trailer-load lot, and putting it out what we have," Greg says. "By last year we had achieved a reputation. They called us and asked when our cattle would be ready, and that's a big advantage."

"We take bids from anybody who wants to bid," he adds. "We even listed them on the Internet once, but a local buyer topped those bids and bought the calves direct." The group is considering using the Angus Resource Clearinghouse Network (ARCNet) now that they have a little data.

The best they could do for the first three years was maintain contact with feedlots where some of the calves were fed, receiving basic group data. Last year they participated in an electronic ID demonstration with the Kentucky Department of Agriculture and wound up getting individual data on one load of steers.

As a group, the steers hit the packers' ideal target: more than 70% Choice and more than 70% Yield Grade 1 and 2 with no discounts. David says those numbers can only improve with the caliber of sires the group is using. Anderson Circle maintains a working relationship with them and has presented to a group of interested producers from another county that came calling last winter.

Cow herd recordkeeping is an emerging skill, and the members point to Sydney as a leader. That's because he had the most variation in his cow herd to start with, he explains. "At one time, I was trying to have a cow from every breed," he grins. The Charolais and Senepol crosses produced growthy calves, but some just didn't fit the higher-percentage-Angus group, so he sold a couple dozen cows and replaced with Angus-sired daughters, then custom-mated the herd.

"We tried to match our calves, so if my cows had the frame, I would use a bull that had a little lower number on frame or wasn't as high off the ground, trying to complement my cows," Sydney explains. "As a group, we could tell when our calves came in how much alike they were — or weren't. We each have veto power, if a calf has the weight but doesn't match anything — maybe he's six inches taller than the others that weight — he doesn't go."

"It's amazing how we can see the calves changing over these few years as we cull the wilder ones and all the outliers," Richard says. "Out of 153 heifers we considered for breeding last year, we culled for disposition, reproductive tract scores and pelvic area to end up with 59 to AI." Those were all bred to Bon-View New Design 1407, at David's suggestion, then exposed to cleanup bulls.

Herd improvement has risen to the level where the group feels confident enough to enter a pen in the Best of the Breed (BoB) Angus challenge. Greg spent the weeks of early winter calling Kansas and Nebraska feedlots in the Certified Angus Beef LLC



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CONTINUED ON PAGE 168

Partners CONTINUED FROM PAGE 167

(CAB) Feedlot Licensing Program (FLP). “We think we have a shot at a regional prize,” he says.

The collection of working ideas the group embodies already won the regional prize in the Intervet/National Cattlemen’s Foundation *Vision 2002 Award*, after being nominated by the Kentucky Cattlemen’s Association, Greg notes.

Their doors are open to add “family,” but distance for work sharing is the limiting factor. “If a person is within 20 miles or so and wants to join, we go look at his cattle. If he’s using other than Angus bulls, we point out that has to change,” David says. “And we talk about how much trust it takes.”

Each group member knows how to dish out ribbing, and each can take it. Richard may talk about spending a Sunday trying to rope calves that escaped at David’s place. Larry or Tim may joke about another partner’s “wild” heifer. Sydney or Jerry may warn folks to believe only half of what Greg says when he’s paying them a compliment. They are just like any band of brothers —

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— Sydney Bunnell

and if it makes you want to move over the hill from one of them in Barren County, Sydney points out that his wife is in real estate down at the bank.

“One of the biggest advantages of having the group compatible is when you need help or a friend, you’ve got him as close as the phone,” Sydney says, suddenly serious. “You cannot put a value on that. If you have a sick calf, or if calves get out, anything at all, you just call one of this group, and he’ll be there to work cattle that are not even his.”

One by one, the testimonials confirm that. “I had heart bypass surgery, and my cattle were taken care of.”

“Yeah, and I had a hernia operation on the coldest day of last winter — mine were taken care of.”

“What makes it work? You’ve got to have a lot of trust, a lot of faith in your neighbors’ taking care of your cattle while you’re taking care of theirs,” Sydney says. “You have to be good, honest people to work together.”

Greg says, “That’s what makes it easy for us to reach a consensus. We have a sense of camaraderie.”

A final example: “Last fall some of the guys came and helped me work my cattle,” Greg says, “and I gave them a bologna sandwich. But at the end of the day I kept hearing about ribeyes. . . . A couple of months later, I had to cook ribeyes.”

“We brought the homemade ice cream though,” Sydney reminds him. And others chime in, “We brought our appetites!”

You cannot put a value on that.

