

Daddy Said They'd Come Back Around



► Straightbred Angus replacement heifers are a marketable item for James Vaughn.

► James Vaughn says his straightbred Angus feeder steers and replacement heifers hit market targets.

Old-fashioned wisdom works for modern markets.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

At first glance, commercial producer James Vaughn doesn't seem to put much thought or effort into his breeding program. All 350 cows are black, as in Angus, and so are his bulls. Open the lid on his semen tank and the labels on the straws will tell the same story.

But sit down and talk to Vaughn, and you'll quickly discover the Forsyth, Ga., cattleman is anything but lazy in thought or action.

He starts with an old-fashioned notion that still makes sense. "Daddy always said he could feed three of these cows cheaper than [he could] two giants. Three calves bring more than two in any market."

Vaughn's father, T. Butler Vaughn, passed away two years ago. But not before he and James built the clone-like herd of moderate-framed cows from the registered cattle he bought in the 1950s.

"I want 1,050- to 1,100-pound (lb.) mama cows," the younger Vaughn says. "I try to keep the pastures stocked pretty heavily with them."

He adds, "I want moderate growth. I'm not looking to create large cattle. I'm shooting to get a 550- to 600-pound calf at seven months, and we generally do that."

Hitting market parameters

Okay, that's what Vaughn wants. But what

about his buyer? As it turns out, he wants the same thing.

"We look for a 600-pound high-yielding calf that has a lot of carcass characteristics and gain," Bill Pellett says.

As for specifics, the Atlantic, Iowa, feeder says, "I'm very comfortable with the cattle and how they perform. James does an excellent job. He is hitting the market parameters."

And then some. The cattle consistently grade more than 80% Choice. "One time we got eight Primes out of 17 head," Vaughn says. "Bill really likes that."

But what about yield grades? Not a problem. Pellett generally markets the cattle on IBP's Real Time grid. The base is a Choice yield grade (YG) 3.

"They really whack you for a Prime yield grade 4," he comments.

After three years of buying the Georgia straightbred Angus calves, Pellett says, "We've tweaked the system to increase gains, and we're using different implants. We're still getting quite a bit of feed efficiency, but it hasn't hurt the yield grades any. We took a systematic approach."

As for getting paid for his cattle, Vaughn says he and Pellett have a mini-negotiation on each truckload. "We get on the phone and talk about it. We look at his markets, the local markets, the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) weekly markets and the cash price on the futures, and we know what it costs to ship them. If I have a set I know will do better I'll push a little harder. I might leave a little money on the table, but I doubt it."

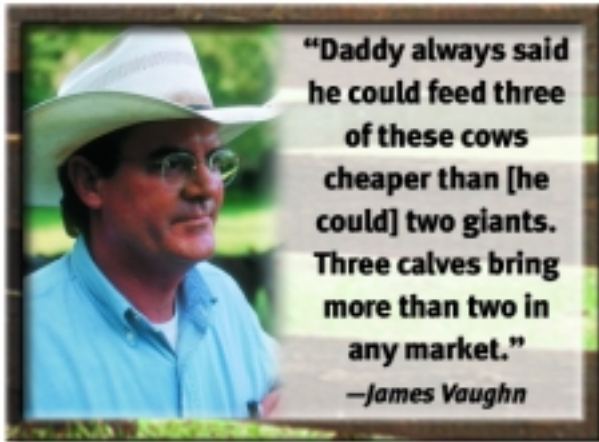
Marketing the other half

However, steers are only half of what Vaughn produces. He also has heifers.

"We usually sell 100 a year as replacements, and generally I am very pleased. I can get more for them than for the steers."

While Vaughn sells the majority of heifers

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private treaty, for three years he has consigned a sample to Georgia's Heifer Evaluation and Reproductive Development (HERD) program. At central test facilities in northern and southern Georgia, heifers are developed and bred by artificial insemination (AI) to low-birth-weight Angus bulls, and growth and reproductive performance is measured. The producers can either bring them back to their own operations or sell them at the end of the testing period.

"Last year we had the No. 2-selling heifer at the Calhoun HERD program," Vaughn says. "The prices have been good."

So how does Vaughn come up with these cattle that consistently hit the grade and yield parameters, as well as make mama cows?

"There is a lot of old Angus genetics in them," he remarks. While Vaughn does a bit of experimenting with fairly new bulls in his small core of registered cattle, most of the pedigrees list golden oldies like Scotch Cap, Traveler and Wye bulls.

When it comes time to pick the heifers that go back in his own herd, he says, "I try

to select heifers that are going to be like the cows we have now. We want easy-fleshing, moderate-framed cows that can have a calf."

Pros of hybrid vigor

Careful selection of his straightbreds aside, there is more than 30 years of research and experience from other producers that say Vaughn could probably produce quality cattle, more economically, with a

planned crossbreeding program.

"Hybrid vigor is the big issue," says Virginia Tech animal scientist David Notter. "A black baldie cow is almost always a little more fertile, produces calves with heavier weaning weights, is a little more efficient kind of cow, and stays in the herd longer than a straightbred cow."

He says research generally shows a 4% advantage in weaning weight for a crossbred calf. "That's approximately 20 pounds. That is a pretty big potential advantage to give up."

However, Notter asks, "Is there enough of a premium for a straight Angus compared to a black baldie to more than cover the loss of efficiency? If he is looking at a Prime market, he may have a point."

Then again, Vaughn's cows are pretty darn efficient. His average calving interval is 11.5 months on his grass-based system. And while Pellett says he wishes some of his suppliers would crossbreed, Vaughn isn't one of them.

So for now, he'll just keep on selecting for his optimum straightbreds.

Moderation is key

On the bulls, both his homegrown and purchased ones, he says, "I push for moderation. I don't believe in birth weight EPDs (expected progeny differences) below zero. I want a 2.5 to 3.5 birth weight EPD with at least a 15 on milk. I shoot for weaning weights in the high 30s. Yearling weights are not all that important to me. I don't get extremely high ones in the 80s and 90s. If I shoot for extremes, I'm going to lose something on the other end."

Carcass EPDs also get his attention. He wants EPDs that produce his version of an ideal steer. "We want a Prime steer with a 0.4 or 0.5 inch of back fat. We want a ribeye of 12¼ or 12½ square inches, the highest quality grade we can get and the lowest yield grade."

Pellett supplies Vaughn with the carcass data on his steers, and he is in the process of adding it to his cow records. He uses the Bowman Farm Systems Cattle Pro 2000, and already keeps track of when cows calve, the adjusted weaning weight of their calves and health records. When he finishes adding the carcass data to the program, he will use it as another selection tool.

"We were doing a lot of things right for grid markets, but we didn't keep enough records to know what we needed to change. Now we are. We are going to have a database where we can look at a replacement heifer and say her sire and dam had a Prime steer last year. It is not that hard to do. It just takes keeping a pencil and a piece of paper with you all the time."

He says the recordkeeping, as well as Pellett's willingness to supply him with carcass data, is paying off. Last year, the number of Selects was higher than normal. "We identified that problem and got rid of him," Vaughn comments of a sire that was found to be the culprit.

"With his recordkeeping program, he can track his better animals," says John Pope, county Extension agent in Vaughn's home base of Monroe County. "Straightbreeding is working for him, especially since he has gotten into a marketing program. These are Angus cattle with high marbling and a good growth rate. He hasn't really had to sacrifice a lot."

With the dollars Vaughn is getting for his steers and heifers, it looks like another one of T. Butler Vaughn's sayings is proving true. Says Vaughn, "Daddy always said people were going to come back around. They would want purebred cattle."



► Moderate-framed cattle have been a mainstay of James Vaughn's operation.

