

# CONNECTING TO SUCCESS

*Relationships and quality cattle are the best elements in a partnership between seedstock and commercial producers.*

*by Megan Silveira, assistant editor*



His calls are clearly heard across the pasture, cutting through the early morning fog. His powerful frame can be spotted from miles away. He is just as impressive in person as he is on paper.

The Angus bull is a powerhouse in the cattle industry, as he possesses the ability to create calves that uphold the high standards of *the Business Breed*. More than that, he connects seedstock breeders with their customers.

## Correlating in California

For commercial producer Pat Kirby, success comes in the form of cattle that can perform.

Kirby Cattle Co. currently manages about 600 cows in Wilton, Calif., and though Kirby says the Central Valley doesn't put the same harsh demands on the livestock that other parts of the country do, he still expects a lot from his cows.

"The conditions in California are pretty easy on cattle in the country that we run in," he explains. "You need a kind of moderate-framed cow that will raise a pretty good size calf."

Kirby markets his calves private treaty, selling them in May and June right off the cow. He typically keeps 80-100 replacement heifers, but amidst the drought conditions raising concerns about pastureland and water in the Golden State, he didn't save any females this year.

With this breeding strategy, Kirby aims to raise calves that look good in the pasture and can perform either in his own herd as replacements or on the feedlot for his customers. The herd bulls he purchases help his cows produce progeny that fulfill these requirements.

Kirby almost always turns to purebred Angus bulls.

"I just see that the quality of those cattle is at the upper end of the spectrum. Ninety-seven percent of my cows are black — it's what I think works best for us," he says.

Since Kirby started his herd in the early '90s, he has sought out the Angus breed. He appreciates all the work put in by breed associations, but says he has really seen the work of Angus producers pay off in terms of the quality livestock that comes with the breed.

"I'm looking for cattle with good EPDs (expected progeny differences), and prefer low birth weights to minimize any kind of calving problems," he explains.

With an emphasis on both terminal and maternal, Kirby needs bulls that can perform that dual role each breeding season.

Buying a new bull for the herd isn't an everyday occurrence, as Kirby expects his bulls to last four to five breeding seasons, but he says the process of finding the next sire typically stays the same.

He reviews sale books on his own and also works with reputable industry experts.

Kirby knows what he likes in a bull, but he values the input of trusted individuals who are talking to people up and down the state. He uses his local cattlemen's association and various magazine advertisements to connect with Angus breeders.

Whichever route he takes, Kirby says he prefers to see the bull in person before making a final purchase decision.

"I'm kind of a visual person. I want to go look at him," he says. "Even though our country is not severe, the bulls still have to work. I think that's important — that they're ready to go and work when you buy them."

At the end of the day, the quality of the animal is the most important part of the rapport this commercial cattleman hopes to have with seedstock breeders.

"I think the private breeder has got to have a good product, and that's how they stay in business," he explains.

The animal is the foundation of the relationship that's grown by personal interaction. While he doesn't expect seedstock cattlemen to lead him along, he appreciates any effort they put into connecting with him.

"It speaks well for them when they're trying to promote the product they have to sell," Kirby says. "They value every customer that they can do business with, and that sets them apart."

Kirby knows goals and opinions differ from operation to operation, but he says the Angus breed caters to all types and kinds of commercial cattle herds.

"As a whole, the Angus group does a good job of promoting their product," he explains. "I think the industry as a whole has made huge strides in picking out information that is helpful to the producer."

## Alabama associates

The mild summers of Wilton, Calif., contrast sharply with the severe weather found in central Alabama where Louie Duke of Stockdale Farms calls home. Duke has raised his own commercial herd of about 500 females in Talladega, Ala., for the past 55 years.

Though his black-hided cattle require shade in the hot months, Duke says his herd is and will continue to be primarily Angus because of the superior carcass traits they bring to the table.

Duke feeds out his calves before sending them to slaughter, so he says he's searching for genetics that lead to high-marbling, heavy-finishing calves. It's a delicate

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balance, however, as Duke says he still wants females with maternal characteristics.

“If you don’t have the maternal, the carcass won’t do you a whole lot of good,” he explains. “We want to grade Prime and Choice, but still have to have longevity in the herd.”

Miles may separate the two commercial producers, but Duke shares a similar philosophy to Kirby when it comes to selecting bulls.

Duke says seeing a bull’s numbers is the perfect starting point come sale season.

“We look at all the paperwork on them and try to get a real sound bull to use on heifers that can still do well with carcass traits,” he explains. “I go off the numbers the breed associations give you, because that’s what I’ve seen — information is helpful.”

As much as Duke relies on genotype, he still stresses the importance of phenotype. Duke also wants to see a bull in person before committing to a purchase.

He buys directly from seedstock breeders, attending big sales in Alabama and surrounding states in the spring and fall. For Duke, it’s the reliability that can truly make or break a business deal.

“I still call people I bought a bull from 25 years ago, even if it’s just to talk,” Duke says. “It’s that trust you build up with them. You want them to work with you. You get to know them, and they get to know you.”

Like most other commercial cattlemen, Duke uses sale books to discover the bulls he wants to add to his herd, and he appreciates breeders who are willing to talk with him about their livestock before the sale. Whether it’s a phone call weeks ahead of the sale date or a simple conversation before the first fall of the auctioneer’s gavel, Duke wants to connect with the individuals he’s considering doing business with.

He says a big selling point for him on a breeder is a guarantee on a bull’s first breeding season. He needs Angus bulls that are sound and can perform in the pasture, and a seedstock breeder willing to shake hands on their animal’s ability to do so holds a lot of weight in Duke’s opinion.

That final handshake is more than just the acquisition of a new bull for the Alabama breeder. For Duke and so many of his peers, the purchase of an Angus bull is the bridge that connects them to success in a competitive industry.

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# Two-way Street

*Commercial producers and seedstock breeders benefit from the relationship they share.*

A seedstock breeder's ability to connect with their buyers and customers — commercial producers — is crucial to the program's success, says Jeff Mafi, regional manager for the American Angus Association.

Proactive seedstock programs are typically in contact with commercial producers several times a year, he says. For the commercial cattleman, their seedstock counterpart is their source of genetics, information

and education. On the flip side, commercial producers share feedback with registered breeders about how those genetics are performing.

"It's a two-way street," Mafi says. "When that two-way street is healthy, it's a great relationship and a good bond."

It's worth the time investment, Mafi says, and he offers a few tips for seedstock breeders to better connect with their bull buyers.

## 1. Emphasize face-to-face interactions.

"Anytime a registered breeder can get on the ranch and have boots on the ground, it goes a long way," Mafi explains.

He suggests breeders try to visit their customers' ranches once a year for a herd visit. In addition to making the customer feel prioritized, Mafi says this visit allows the seedstock breeder to better understand the commercial cattlemen's ranch and its goals.

Seeing a program firsthand can help a breeder better connect customers with bulls that fit the individual's breeding program and their environment.

## 2. Work with the American Angus Association and its staff.

Mafi says he and his fellow regional managers receive calls from commercial breeders all the time. These individuals often ask for evaluations on registered bulls currently available or how certain sire groups are performing.

"We always give them a fair evaluation, but we connect the needs of those commercial producers to the type of genetics they are seeking," he says.

If a regional manager knows a breeder in the area, they can help initiate contact with a future customer. From there, Mafi says the relationship can be grown further.

## 3. Be willing to back your product.

Seedstock producers want to encourage buyers to believe in their product. Mafi says this encouragement can come in the form of a breeding season guarantee.

"It's not necessarily an insurance policy," he explains, "but it's reassurance those bulls have been thoroughly examined and are guaranteed to breed the cows."

While most policies are set for 90 days after the sale, Mafi says they can be adapted to fit the preferences of the program. A

