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*The MaternalPlus designation is a vital part of the production process at Lisnageer Farms.*

*by Megan Silveira, assistant editor*

“There’s nothing prettier than black cows on green grass,” Bill Fairbairn says quietly as he looks out on the herd of cattle grazing the rolling hills in front of him.

He stands in the Pennsylvania pasture next to his wife, Cheryl, enjoying the silence as their Angus cows gently puff out foggy breaths in the crisp air.

A young blue heeler weaves in and out of the herd, and Bill calls out, the reprimand causing the heads of a few cows to rise. When the pup, Liam, returns to his owners’ sides, all is well again on the peaceful morning.

Liam keeps things exciting at Lisnageer Farm, but the Angus farm is still a sanctuary to Bill and Cheryl. Though the business is named after Bill’s ancestors’ farm in Ireland, the cattle operation is a textbook example of what can be born from the hard work of a passionate Angus producer within the American Angus Association.

There have been more than 40 printed calendars and herd books Bill and Cheryl have kept notes

on since they purchased their first cattle together. Each year the couple breeds for cattle that not only are able to perform in the environment of the Coatesville, Pa., farm, but also complete the perfect picture when the duo walks through the pasture.

The Fairbairns work to make sure they’re active, giving members of the Association. With each animal that passes through their chutes, Cheryl has made it her mission to submit the data she and Bill have on that animal back to the office in Saint Joseph, Mo.

It’s a mission made possible through the use of MaternalPlus® and one Cheryl says helps their industry, helps them as breeders, helps their customers, and, most importantly, upholds the same lessons she and Bill learned from their mentor.

## Lessons learned, lessons shared

Conrad Grove — “Connie” to his friends — became Cheryl’s new neighbor when she moved to join Bill after the pair was married in 1982. He was known as a pioneer for livestock in the area. He managed





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300 Angus cows and a 450 head feedlot, served on the American Angus Association Board of Directors, ran his own 60-head bull test station and diligently submitted data with Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®).

Cheryl and Bill adopted Grove as their mentor, and less than two years after their wedding, the duo bought their first Angus cows. The two Paint Rock Raven daughters were from Grove.

The newlyweds did their best to build the herd, but Cheryl says keeping back replacement females wasn't as easy as expected.

"When you're starting that small and you don't have a ton of money, you just can't build rapidly," she says, remembering times when calves had to be sold rather than retained. "But, you know, the Lord always seemed to look out for us."

Land was bought, leasing opportunities opened up, and more and more females stayed registered under the Lisnageer name.

Today the operation aims to keep 90-120 head of females on a continuous grazing plan across their

pastures. Cheryl is proud many of those animals can be traced back to the original two females they bought from Grove.

It's been more than genetics that Grove provided to the Fairbairns, however. He served as a spokesperson for animal welfare and stockmanship, promoting practices that highlighted his dedication to the livestock and the Association they were registered under.

"We always keep Connie's mantra in mind," Cheryl explains. "He says, 'never go for the extremes; stay down the middle.' And that's pretty much what we have done with this cow herd."

Bill says they don't chase multiple numbers and select for matings that help balance traits, choices that are consistent with what Grove used to preach.

The old bloodlines serving as the farm's foundation have proven themselves in practice for the farm, but Cheryl identifies a problem that come with the historical pedigrees: there's a gap in the genomics.

Some generations of breeders that utilize these same pedigrees still don't quite buy into the world of genetics

*Continued on page 30*



and expected progeny differences (EPDs). Their choice not to turn data back to the American Angus Association has been a bit of a hindrance to dedicated breeders like Bill and Cheryl.

The Fairbairns have made it their mission to not only promote data submission to their peers in the Angus breed, but also serve as an example of what it means to diligently collect and turn in the numbers from the herd.

When Grove first filled the role of mentor, he taught

Bill and Cheryl how to utilize AHIR. It was a lesson that stuck, even after they left the role of mentee.

When the Association introduced MaternalPlus, Cheryl wasn't sure if it was going to be the right system for them. Transition into the program felt like a time-consuming process but Cheryl says it was a change that proved to be a good move for the operation.

"It is a pain, but it's worth it," she admits, laughing. "You are amazed at what you find."

As she was getting her data up to date, Cheryl was shocked by how many females were still in the system but had not been active for years.

Nowadays, Bill and Cheryl's herd is marked with the MaternalPlus badge, a visual that identifies them as an operation dedicated to data reporting.

"That very first year, that was a lot of work. But I really do enjoy it," Cheryl says.

As calves are born and weights are collected, Bill writes down the numbers and dates in the record book he keeps on his person. Dates when groups are moved to a new pasture or bulls are turned out are kept on a calendar in the farm office.

When calving season is over, responsibilities shift to Cheryl. She collects the calendar from the office and the

## Interested in earning the MaternalPlus badge? *The first step is to enroll in the Inventory Reporting program.*

At your first annual reenrollment, you will have the opportunity to move to the next level in Inventory Reporting — MaternalPlus. Earning the MaternalPlus designation appears on EPD/Pedigree lookup to show your operation is dedicated to data reporting, provides you and your customers with information to make effective selection decisions, expands reproductive and cow survivability tools, and so much more. Earning the designation also provides the CED (calving ease direct), BW (birth weight) and WW (weaning weight) EPDs for unregistered calves in your herd, providing additional selection tools earlier.







herd book from Bill and enters all the data into the AHIR program online. If data is missing on a cow or something doesn't look right, Cheryl makes a note in the herd book and holds off from entering data for that female. At weaning, when the pairs are all up at the chutes, she and Bill will try to get things corrected. Immediately after weaning is complete, more weights are entered. Breeding data is entered directly after breeding season concludes.

It's a fairly straightforward process and a continuous cycle, but it's taken time to perfect. Bill and Cheryl work as a team, each leaning into their strengths and emphasizing the importance of accurate data. Corners aren't cut at Lisnageer Farms.

"The data going into the Association for the whole genomic piece is vitally important," Cheryl says. "There's not going to be very sound data unless you put data in. This program forces you to take the data, put the data in — but it provides you with such a tool."

Beyond its ability to add to the genomic database of *The Business Breed*, the MaternalPlus designation within the Inventory Reporting program has helped the couple make a lot of production decisions.

Sale prices from all sold cattle can easily be pulled into one report. Candidates for culling can be pinpointed as production reports, make it simple to identify who isn't consistently breeding back. Registering calves happens with the click of a button, rather than the shuffling of papers and a hunt for the registration numbers of dams and sires. Even the few commercial head of cattle on the farm can be added to the inventory.

"They have all the information right there," Cheryl says. "In the old days, you used to have to go, 'Oh my God,

what is his registration number? What's her registration number?' You had to look all this up and have papers in front of you. Now it's just so much nicer."

The simplicity of recordkeeping has allowed the Fairbairns to focus on other things at the operation, items that are at the forefront of the beef industry.

Cheryl has hopes of diving deeper into the foot-scoring guides released by the American Angus Association. It's a new type of data she knows will take time to collect and submit, but it's data that can help the greater good.

On Bill and Cheryl's farm, that's what being an Angus member and breeder is all about. Participating in MaternalPlus and submitting data is what it takes to truly be a part of this breed association, Cheryl says, and it's what helps the breed advance forward.

"The Angus cow is the foundation of our breed, and just having this tool to be able to evaluate the cows better and be able to pull out the truly excellent ones and increase their potency in the herd is really great," Bill says.

For many years to come, it's a message Bill will proudly preach and act out in his daily life on the farm.

He'll carry his herd book as he checks cow-calf pairs, and he'll continue to make sure Cheryl has the numbers she needs. Cheryl will enter data to earn MaternalPlus, and she'll continue to share the benefits of the program with cattlemen she encounters.

It's all in an effort to create that pretty view of good, functional black cows out on green grass. Every time they utilize MaternalPlus, Bill and Cheryl know they're submitting data in an effort to help ensure that the only thing disturbing the peace in their Pennsylvania pastures is a young blue heeler, just as ready to work as his owners. 