

Progress that Counts

Breeding philosophies, generational turnover, adoption of new technology — pushing Angus in the right direction.

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

“A really good breeder told me about 30 years ago ... part of this thing is getting there as fast as you can. He said — just as important — never back up. Try to balance risk and reward.”

The piece of advice is from the past, but it’s one that Ben Eggers, Sydenstricker Genetics, still applies when talking about progress in the modern beef industry. The cattle business is all about pushing forward to improve the population and offer the best genetics to customers, but those are goals that can only be accomplished with discipline.

Eggers and Darin Meyer, De-Su Angus, joined *The Angus Conversation* podcast last season to discuss the topic.

Eggers theorizes the best progress — for both an individual breeder and the industry as a whole — happens when people fully support the herd they’ve built.

“I urge people to breed the kind of cattle that they like, because they can therefore merchandise them and market them better,” he says.

Meyer offers a similar outlook when it comes to adopting a breeding philosophy.

“Be disciplined, and don’t waver back and forth,” he says, “because as you waver, you’re not pinpointing that focus.”

With a background in the dairy industry, consistency has always



been top of mind for Meyer. When he started his Angus herd about six years ago, the Iowa cattleman kept the same emphasis.

Meyer aims to stay at the forefront of the industry, maintaining an emphasis on genetic consistencies like a high \$B (Beef Value index) and \$C (Combined Value index). He starts his breeding season looking at an animal on paper before making a final sort on phenotype. A general rule of thumb at De-Su Angus is to start off looking at an animal’s two worst traits and select a mating that will help balance those out.

“A cow is never as good as her best trait,” he explains. “She’s only as good as her worst trait.”

He knows genomics has been a back-and-forth topic for Angus breeders, but Meyer stands firmly behind the science. The true purpose of genomics has gotten a little lost in the marketing, he says, but when it’s used as a starting point for breeders, it offers a lot of insight.

Meyer pushes genomics and reproductive technology “pretty hard,” but implements a checks-and-balances system. He only selects donor females if they have a proven sire in their pedigree and their dam still stands good in the pasture.

It’s a strategy that’s allowed Meyer to turn young females into donors early in their lives, and it’s a strategy he believes has kept his herd relevant.

“You would’ve never thought that you could’ve had an Angus cow that looks like it does today,” he explains. “I truly feel that if you stack your generations of animals that are similar to your target and get new genetic combinations ... I firmly believe that you will be able to get animals that can push those high growth EPDs (expected progeny differences) along with great management traits.”

At his Missouri operation, Eggers employs the same types of technology, embracing embryo transfer (ET); but he says his donors are selected from proven cows and without much emphasis on genomics.

“I sure don’t want to wade in too deep, either, with that quick generational turnover,” he says.

Eggers looks at the “total picture.” Bulls have to have the ability to make it in the real world, and cows have to have raised a few good calves before either bloodline is raised to the top of the operation’s breeding program.

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EPDs are looked at for both donors and sires to avoid big holes in an animal’s genetic appeal, but Eggers has always considered structure a priority.

No matter a breeder’s strategy, Eggers says this is the most stressful time to breed cattle, especially compared to breeding seasons 10 to 20 years in the past.

“It was all phenotype then,” he explains. “If you liked him, great. And if you didn’t, you didn’t, and it was simple.”

Yet, both cattlemen agree the new technology and tools put out by the Association get a lot of credit for the breed’s growth.

Eggers says EPDs are generally “right on the money” for producers, adding to their ability to breed for cattle that fit an operation’s goals and environment. Hair shedding, foot,

and teat and udder scores have all been pleasant surprises for him lately, and Eggers looks forward to how those tools will continue to develop.


Meyer suggests accuracy is a tool that becomes even more important when making progress quickly.

“It’s kind of like a golf swing. If you can hit it really, really hard, it’s not going straight, you’re probably just going further away from the hole than closer to it,” he notes.

Both breeders say submitting performance and genomic data in tandem is ideal for the long-term.

“You can have a bull with pretty high accuracy nowadays and still basically all genomics. And I’m not saying that’s necessarily wrong, but we probably will have some situations where, if we get to stringing it out too far, we’re going to have some bad surprises somewhere

along the way,” Eggers says. “To me, incentivizing phenotypic data submission is still an important part of going forward.”

If Association members can stay true to their thoughts on the best cow and consistently breed for that kind of animal, they’re in control of the direction of the breed. With a balance of risk and reward, both cattlemen are confident Angus breeders will continue to make strides in the industry, and move forward at a speed that outpaces competitors. 

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8	0.5	98	167	1.54	29	0.38	0.41	-1.96	0.41	11.6	7	26	82	0.53	0.69	0.033	84	166	299
.64	.85	.81	.71	.72	.77	.65	.64	.25	.27	.24	.30	.32	.49	.43	.44	.42	5%	15%	10%
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