

LEAD IN

by Richard L. Spader, Executive Vice President
American Angus Association



Richard L. Spader

Why Do Americans Crossbreed Everything...?

"Why do Americans crossbreed everything except dairy cattle," a visiting New Zealand cattleman was quoted in a recent article I read.

That's a good question and it stimulated a lot of thought about the beef industry today and the direction we are headed. It may be a question all of us, in all areas of beef production and education, need to ponder.

For more than two decades now we have been advised that the road to profitability in the beef cattle industry is a systematic crossbreeding program. Research supports this theory and it works, providing the marketing chain does not differentiate the value of the end product produced. Your Association took the lead in this area. It was the first breed association to sponsor "crossbreeding" ads in the early 1960s when the three British breeds dominated the beef cattle industry. What's more, Angus has been the base breed in most of the more recent crossbreeding operations.

Crossbreeding became so popular that nearly every cattle producer got caught up in the spirit. Cattle producers wanted more of everything — breeds, growth, mature size, milk, the works. Now, it seems, the party is over. What I hear from cattle producers all over the country is they are in a dilemma. Their mongrelized cow herds produce an inconsistent end product — too much low quality, too much waste fat, too many calving problems, too high maintenance costs.

The Beef Quality Audit, conducted by the industry in 1991, supports many of the conclusions cattle producers are drawing. It clearly points out that variability in beef quality and consistency (particularly tenderness) puts beef at a competitive disadvantage at the retail meat counter.

Since 1976 when the quality standards for USDA beef grades were lowered with the goal of increasing the percentage of USDA Choice cattle and reducing the amount of waste fat produced, the industry has done just the opposite. We produce fewer cattle with sufficient taste fat and too many with excess waste fat.

It may be wrong to blame all this on the multitude of breeds, and the fascination with crossbreeding, but they share the blame. Simply, an inconsistent breeding program produces an inconsistent product.

Now a new form of crossbreeding is on the horizon. It is called composites. Instead of using purebred bulls on crossbred cows, the idea is to produce crossbred bulls and use them on crossbred cows. At the time when we are worrying about consistency, new forms of crossbreeding are

being advocated. What we Don't need, it seems to me, are more breeds of crossbred bulls and cows to mix and match.

Maybe it's time for our industry to reassess what we are doing. Maybe it is time we seriously try to answer the New Zealander's question. Some people are already hying. Your American Angus Association Board of Directors, at a long-range planning session two years ago, recognized that opportunities exist for owners of straightbred commercial Angus herds. They set as one of their four goals to inform the commercial beef cattle industry of the opportunities of using a straightbred commercial Angus herd and of the advantages of increasing the percentage of Angus in crossbred commercial herds.

This shift in emphasis in Angus cattle promotion hasn't been met with unanimous acclaim by those who sincerely believe crossbreeding offers the most profit potential in every commercial cow herd.

Nevertheless, the idea seems to be catching on with individual cattle producers. The truth is most are seeing the need to return to the basics in order to survive. And many look upon Angus as the basic breed offering the most of what they need to maximize profits.

While most herds are still crossbred, and may remain so, more commercial producers have discovered the simplicity of building a program with only the Angus breed. Thanks to the Sire Evaluation Program they can select for whatever combination of traits they need in their herd.

With Angus they can get as much or as little of any measured traits they need or want, all within one breed. And when it comes to carcass EPD, Angus is virtually their only source.

In this country, some 80 percent of cattle producers have 50 cows or less. In these programs a straightbred Angus herd that relies on top quality performance evaluated bulls can be a blessing in disguise to busy owners with a variety of business irons in the fire. Straightbred Angus herds would seem to be a simple and realistic approach to cattle production for the 90s and beyond.

Today we enjoy the best demand for Angus cattle in many a year as more commercial producers take advantage of the added value Angus can produce in their herds. And though we don't have all the answers, the New Zealander makes a point the beef industry simply can't ignore.

Richard L. Spader