



A successful tattoo starts with having the proper equipment.

JAMI STUMP PHOTOS

Permanent identification starts with a successful

TATTOO

Don't run the risk of having an illegible tattoo by using an improper technique.

BY JAMI STUMP

It's a relaxing Sunday afternoon, and you're walking among the weaned calves. That's when you stumble upon a trio of unfamiliar calves that are missing their tags. With no cows to help claim their calves, you could be in a real predicament without another, more permanent means of identification. If you have taken the time to tattoo your calves correctly, the loss of

that not-so-permanent tag is nothing to fret. A quick run through the chute, and you'll be able to distinguish the Pathfinder's daughter from that crossbred heifer's calf.

Tattooing is a permanent, accurate and easy way to identify cattle. It's also a requirement for registering an animal with the American Angus Association. Proper identification at birth and legible tattoos are essential

to maintaining accurate parentage and production records of Angus cattle.

Tattooing can be done anytime before registering, although it's best done when the animals are young. Twig Marston, Kansas State University (K-State) Extension beef specialist, recommends tattooing calves before 3 months of age.

"The younger you tattoo a calf, the more legible the

tattoo will be," says Marston, who specializes in cow-calf management. "The tattoo will grow as the calf gets older, making it easier to read."

Marston says successful tattooing is a result of proper technique and the completion of a series of steps. Here are some steps that can be taken to help ensure a legible tattoo.



There are a variety of tattoo pliers available on the market.



After loading the pliers with the digits, be sure to check the tattoo on something like cardboard or an old feed sack.

Proper equipment

Success starts with having the necessary tattooing equipment. Before beginning, a breeder should have a complete set of number and letter characters, if used. Sets of tattoo characters have one of each number (0-9) or letter (A-Z), so you may have to purchase more than one set. Tattoo equipment can be purchased from a livestock supply dealer or directly from the American Angus Association.

Remember that a registered tattoo can have a maximum of four units (digits and/or letters) applied in a straight line. Proper examples include M909, 2RT2, 919J or 19E. The American Angus Association's *Breeder's Reference Guide* states that no special marks — such as joined letters, reversed letters, brand marks or other symbols — are permissible in tattoos.

There are a variety of different types of tattoo pliers, which use removable digits, on the market. Some pliers have revolving heads and will hold two different tattoos at once.

You'll need a rag or a sponge and some rubbing alcohol to clean out the ear before you apply the tattoo.

Tattoo ink, preferably green rather than black, is critical in getting a readable and permanent tattoo. Green ink that comes in a paste form is used and recommended by Angus producers. With the aid of a toothbrush, the green paste can be worked into a fresh tattoo easily. In black ears the distinctive green color helps you see that the ink has worked into the perforations. Working the green paste in well leads to a better, more legible tattoo.

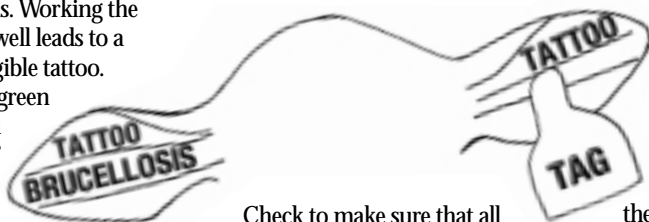
"Ketchum® green ink has worked the best for us," says Keith Stevenson, owner of Stevenson Angus Ranch. "It is thicker, and the tattoos seem to take better when you use the green ink paste rather than a roll-on ink."

A good working chute is also critical to a legible tattoo. The chute should restrain the animal from making quick head movements.

"The only stress on the animal during the tattooing process comes from poor restraint," Marston says. "For a readable tattoo to happen, the animal must hold still and be kept from moving its head."

Ready to begin

Once you have the calf in the working chute, check your records and establish the tattoo that will identify the calf. Place the corresponding digits in your pliers. Marston suggests checking the tattoo on something like a piece of cardboard or an old feed sack. Otherwise, you run the risk of incorrectly tattooing the calf.



Check to make sure that all of your digits make an even perforation. Robert Larson, University of Missouri-Columbia (MU) Beef Focus Team veterinarian, says that one common mistake breeders make is not throwing away dull, broken or hair-matted characters. Such digits do not allow for deep penetration into the ear tissue.

Cleaning the ear and ridding it of all wax and dirt is the next step. Gerald Stokka, K-State Extension beef veterinarian, says the key to a good tattoo is a clean ear.

"To really do a good job, you need to clean out that ear with alcohol," Stokka stresses. "You can't get a tattoo to take with all the wax and dirt that is normally in the ear."

The ear should be dry before moving on to the next step — applying ink. The American Angus Association recommends tattooing the animal in the upper lobe, reserving the middle lobe of the right ear for the brucellosis tattoo and the middle lobe of the left ear for an ear tag.

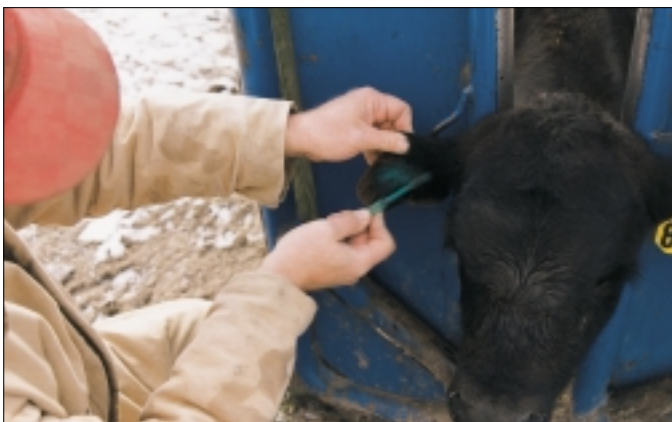
"Make sure that the tattoo is stamped in the middle third [horizontally] of the ear, between the ribs," says Matt Perrier, American Angus Association regional manager. "If it's too far out, the hair will grow around it, and it is nearly impossible to read."

Before tattooing the animal, rub the ink in with a toothbrush or your thumb. By your doing this, the ink will more likely be carried into the new tattoo.

When ready to proceed, place the ear between the jaws of the pliers. It's important when clamping the pliers to use the right amount of pressure, says



Be sure the ear is clean and dry before tattooing.



Before tattooing rub the ink in with a toothbrush or your thumb; this will help the ink be carried into the new tattoo.



When ready to proceed, place the ear between the jaws of the pliers and apply pressure. If the ear bleeds profusely, apply more ink to stop the bleeding.

Establishing a herd ID system

Before tattooing, an effective and well-planned herd identification system must be established. This system should benefit the producer and make herd recordkeeping easier.

Depending on a breeder's needs, a tattoo can reflect several different things. The tattoo can refer to the year the calf was born, the offspring's parents, or relate a number in a sequence as to when the calf was born.

Richard McClung, Jr., manager of Wehrmann Angus, says they use a system he considers to be foolproof. Their tattooing system begins with the last number of the year the calf was born. It is followed by a sire code letter that is established for each bull used. The last number in their system is the number of the calf's birth in relationship to calves out of only one sire, not the complete set of calves.

An example would be an animal given the tattoo 5TR2. This tattoo tells you the animal was born in 1995; TR is the code for the bull RR Traveler 5204; and it is their second calf out of that bull.

"We like this system because we know exactly when the calf was born, to which sire and when in comparison to other calves born by that sire," McClung says. "Using other systems the calves just begin to be a bunch of numbers; but, with this system, if you know the sire code you know everything there is to know about a calf by reading its tattoo."

Another system popular worldwide is to use letters to represent the year the calf was born. Keith Stevenson, owner of Stevenson Angus Ranch, uses this system. J is the letter producers are using to represent 1999. 1998's letter was H, and calves born in 2000 will be Ks. With this system the letters "I," "O," "V" and "Q" are not used.

"You go for more than 20 years before you repeat a letter with this system," Stevenson says. "With numbers representing years you only have 10 years before you have to repeat."

One of the most common tattooing systems is to have the first number represent the year the animal was born and then follow that with the order in which the calf was born. Using this system, the 15th calf born in 1997 would have a tattoo of 715. Tag color can then be used to denote sire.

Another similar system would be to have the year as the last number in the tattoo.

Ron Gillig of Stoney Creek Farms, Odessa, Mo., has used both systems in the past. He started by using the last character in the tattoo corresponding to the year. This changed when he went to printed ear tags and needed to have a more uniform system.

Breeders need to develop a tattoo system that fits their needs, depending on how important the sire, dam, or the relationship of age between calves is to them.



Once you have a calf in the working chute ready to tattoo, check your records and establish the tattoo that will help you identify the calf.

Marston. "Use enough pressure that it pierces the skin, but don't go so deeply that it bleeds profusely."

The only way to stop an ear from bleeding after the use of too much pressure is to reapply ink, Stokka points out. "Put on more ink and use that toothbrush to get the ink down in those perforations. The ink helps the blood to coagulate."

Make sure that the ink is worked thoroughly into the tattoo to ensure a legible and permanent tattoo mark.

When the tattooing process is finished, Larson says to clean the characters to remove all hair, dirt and blood. This is also when you should throw away and get replacements for the ones that are dull.

Imperfect tattoos

The Association recommends checking all tattoos at weaning or any time an animal's in the chute. There are always exceptions; tattoos won't always be perfect. Two frequent causes of imperfect tattoos are poor technique and, for breeders calving during the cold months of January and February, frozen ears.

Stevenson has had problems with frozen ears while managing his herd of more than 1,200 registered Angus cattle near Hobson, Mont.

"Frozen ears happen," Stevenson says. "There are some preventative measures that you can take. You need to make sure those ears are good and dry before you turn a newborn calf out in the cold — although that doesn't always work, because mothers will lick on the ears, which can cause a problem."

Stevenson has found two management practices that result in fewer frozen ears. He says putting alcohol on cold ears can revive the circulation within, saving the ear from being completely frozen off.

Also, Stevenson frequently uses duct tape to hold the ears next to the head. This practice works well during long stretches of cold weather in the middle of calving season.

The Association has established guidelines to address frozen ears and illegible tattoos of calves being registered. Producers have two options for identifying calves with little or no ears:

1. If there is enough room for either one number or one letter, the animal should be tattooed.
2. Only in situations where there is not enough ear to tattoo can a freeze brand or a hot brand be used as an identification mark. The brand should be a three-unit mark. On the certificate of registration, an asterisk will be placed in the tattoo column next to the brand units.

"We have very few ears frozen to the extent you can't get at least a one-character tattoo," says Don Painter, American Angus Association director of membership services and office management. "If there is no way a breeder can get a tattoo in the ear, they can freeze or hot-iron brand no more than three units as an alternative."

If a tattoo is not legible, re-tattoo the animal in a different lobe of the ear with the same marking. Association rules emphasize never to try to alter or over-imprint an old tattoo.

You can rest assured, now that you have successfully tattooed your calves by following these suggestions, your next Sunday afternoon outing to check the weaned calves will be uneventful.



An important ingredient to showing

Tattoos play a major role in the showring. Don't get caught having a tattoo you can't read or, even worse, none at all.

"You should never leave home without checking a tattoo," says Dean Hurlbut, American Angus Association director of activities. "Once an animal has been through the chute and we find a slick ear [no tattoo] or an unreadable tattoo, the animal will not be allowed to show."

Hurlbut points out that the animal can be tattooed at home but not at the show. Check purchased cattle tattoos closely before attending a show, Hurlbut advises. "Without knowing, a breeder may have forgotten to tattoo a calf or may have given a calf a wrong tattoo."

Planning ahead and checking tattoos can save driving

hundreds of miles to a show and not being able to exhibit an animal.

If there is a problem with a calf's tattoo when you check it, you can have the papers corrected before heading to the show or you can tattoo the animal.

"Never change a tattoo in an ear," Hurlbut says, but you can "make a change on the registration paper."

The American Angus Association requires that tattoos have no more than four characters, which can be letters, numbers or both



At all Association-sponsored shows tattoos are checked to make sure they correspond with an animal's registration paper. If a calf's tattoo is unreadable it is not allowed to show.

(see accompanying story). Tattoos need to be present in both ears. Having a tattoo in both ears assures that the animal will be able to show.

"As long as an official of the American Angus Association can make out the tattoo, even if it means using a combination of the two ears, we will let the animal show," Hurlbut says. If there is a problem, the representative may suggest the producer again tattoo the animal in a different lobe.

After an Association representative checks the tattoo and it corresponds with the animal's official registration paper (no copies allowed), they stamp, date and initial the paper. At future shows if an animal's paper is already stamped, only registration papers are needed by the Association at check-in time.