High Plains Cowman

Colorado's Adrian Weaver is a 40-year survivor in the seedstock business. Here's why.

BY ERIC GRANT

Just west of Adrian Weaver's home, the red-rock rims of Owl Canyon rise abruptly from Colorado's High Plains. It's a good but unforgiving place to raise cattle. Winters can be cold and windy, which ensures only good-doing cattle survive. And springs are nothing if not unpredictable, with warm Chinook winds on one day, then a blizzard on the next.

"I like the spring," Weaver reflects. "I like the rebirth, the new calves, the promise of green grass."

Located just 15 miles north of Fort Collins, Weaver Angus Ranch is a fairly isolated place. Not many of the folks who drive up and down nearby Interstate 25 even know it's there. Apart from his cows, which scatter across the prairie, there's little clue that one of the nation's leading Angus herds is right there.

Weaver prefers it that way. He's a cowman. And he likes the traditions of the cow business. When cows need to be worked, he saddles up and rides. He keeps things as simple as he can. He gets help from his three daughters: Susan, who works on the ranch full-time, and Maxine and Mourine, who help out when they can.

But he also understands that he's in an increasingly competitive business, an industry that will require the use of new technology, improved customer service and the documentation of performance to remain competitive. A 40-year survivor of the seedstock business, he only sees more competition for beef in the years to come.

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Veterinarian's perspective

Weaver grew up in the nearby town of Virginia Dale. His father, a cowman, taught him the ropes and showed him how to make a living with livestock. He went to college with thoughts of someday returning to ranching. He graduated from veterinary school in Wyoming, then bought a ranch near Tie Siding, which he operated for about 17 years. In 1969 he returned to Colorado when he purchased his present operation.

Being a veterinarian gave Weaver a unique perspective and invaluable experience when it comes to animal health and management.

"As a vet, I'd come to realize that Angus cattle were the most trouble-free breed as far as calving and cancer eyes, prolapses and dehorning," he explains. "I didn't want to [have to] practice on my own cows, so Angus was a logical way to go."

At first, Angus was a tough sell. Buyers in the 1960s discriminated against them, paying less for straight blacks than they would for Hereford or black-baldie cattle. Then in the late 1980s, market momentum began to shift, and demand for black cattle began to build.

"We were operating pretty much like a commercial operation," Weaver reflects. "We sold steers and even bought some when we weren't at capacity in our pastures. I gradually went into the registered business. We bought some good registered cows, then we started AIing (using artificial insemination) about 25 years ago. That was when things really started to improve for us."

Joining the registered ranks

Today, the operation claims about 650 registered Angus cows. To market his genetics, Weaver hosts an annual production sale at the ranch in February, something he's done for about 15 years. He sells approximately 70 bulls and 65 females each year.

"We cull our calf crop pretty deep because we want to make sure only the best we have sells through our sale," Weaver says, adding that they sell a lot of steers. "We learned a long time ago that if a calf won't make a good bull, we make a steer out of him. It doesn't pay to fool people."

This commitment to selling only the best has paid dividends. Weaver estimates 70% of his bull buyers are repeat customers. That's a track record he hopes to continue.

"It's always flattering when you have folks buy your cattle who've been doing so for several years," he says. Weaver attributes some of his success to producing good-doing, structurally sound cattle. He wants performance, not frame, and he wants his cow herd to possess topflight maternal traits, too.

Making use of ultrasound

In addition, Weaver focuses much of his selection effort on carcass quality. Besides gathering carcass information on progeny of his sires, he recently started ultrasounding all of his yearling bulls for carcass traits.

Ultrasound is a relatively new technology that helps producers sort, manage and market cattle at targeted end points. It's unique because it allows producers actually to see what they could not see before. It uses high-frequency sound waves to measure differences in tissue density in the live animal. The image it produces shows ribeye area, marbling and fat cover on live animals long before they're in the packing plant.

Back in 1997, the American Angus Association approved a two-year Centralized

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Ultrasound Processing (CUP) program with hopes of determining the feasibility of ultrasound, defining genetic parameters from which to calculate EPDs, and to compare ultrasound EPDs to carcass EPDs. The results of the study demonstrated that ultrasound detected the same traits in yearling bulls and developing heifers as those exhibited in 16- to 18-month-old steers in the packing plants.

Participation of individual Angus breeders like Weaver has astounded researchers at the Association. Already it has received more than 108,000 records since 1998. To put that in perspective, in all the years the Association collected carcass records, it only had about 50,000 carcasses go through the program. Ultrasound technology has allowed the American Angus Association to generate body composition EPDs for 60,000 yearling bulls, 25,000 yearling heifers, 64,000 dams and 5,123 sires.

"The bottom line is that, heretofore, by using the old carcass data collection system, we had at our disposal a total of 277 Angus sires with 35 carcasses or more on record," says John Crouch, the Association director of performance programs. "That's very limited numbers. Ultrasound gives us potential to evaluate almost every yearling bull, female and sire and dam in the breed for carcass traits. We never had that capability before."

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Weaver adds, "Based on what we're seeing, I think we're on track. We've been lucky by using some good bulls with carcass traits before we even knew it. Now, with ultrasound, I think we're going to gain ground pretty fast. Progeny testing with carcasses is a slow process. With ultrasound, you can just about jump a generation and go right to the source. By doing it the old way, if you find out a bull is really good for carcass traits, he's probably dead; and it's too late to use him. With the ultrasound, you can go right to the live animal, collect semen and breed him to your cows right away."

Weaver emphasizes cattle that balance maternal, performance and carcass traits.

"You've got to keep all your traits in mind when you're selecting cattle," he says. "We don't baby our cattle much. They've got to make it on their own. We try to operate like the commercial man does.

"I think you've got to stay on top of everything, and you've got to work hard and all the time at improving your genetics," Weaver concludes. "If this industry is to remain competitive, we've got to provide the consumer with a good product. That's for certain. Quality is one advantage that American producers have over the importers. And that's what it's going to take to stay in business." AJ