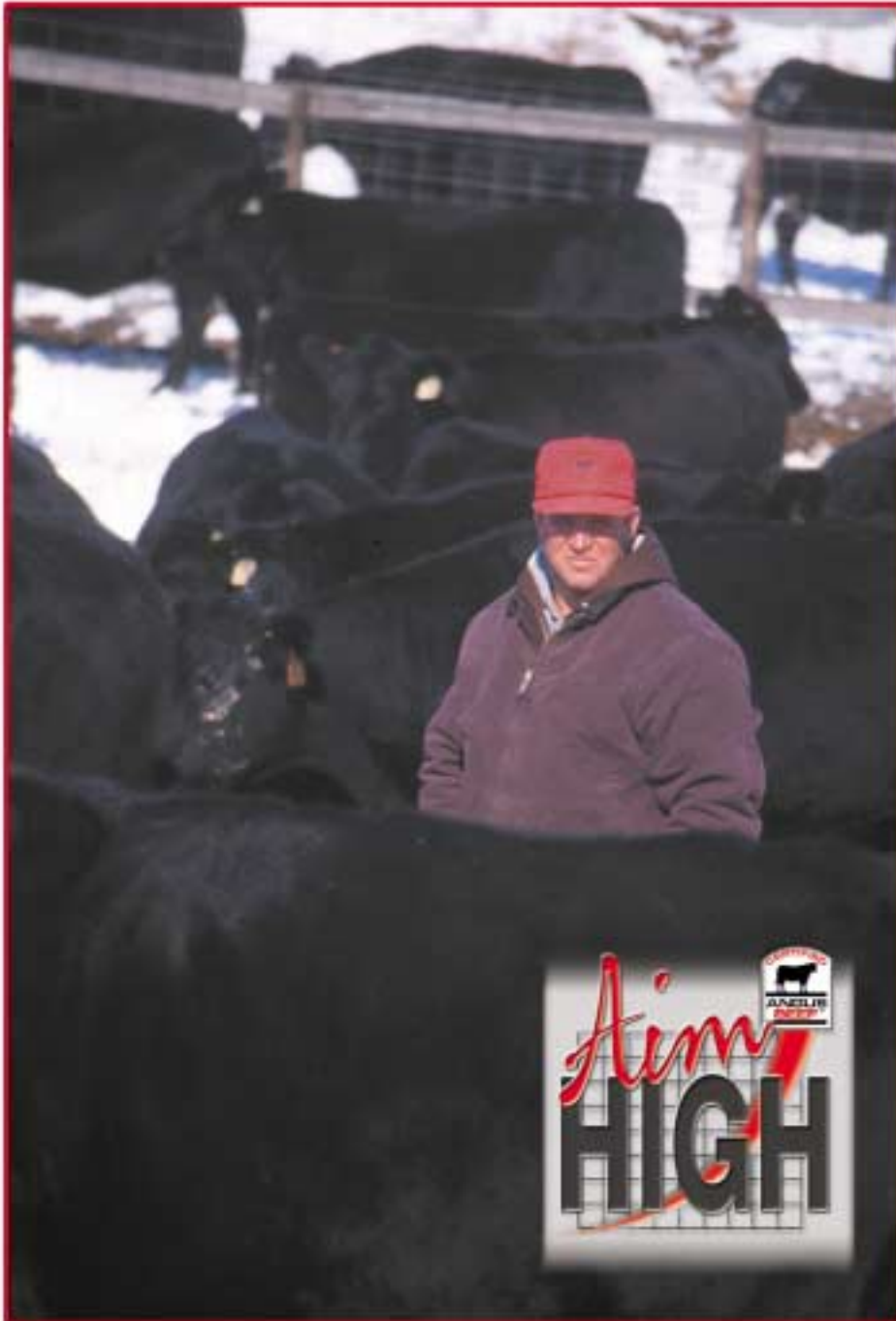


Moore cattle get BETTER OVER TIME

STORY & PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER



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Monte Moore grew up with Hereford cattle in the gently rolling hills of northwest Kansas. He watched his dad, Loyd, and his uncle Melvin begin making the switch to black baldies in the late 1960s. The Moores began buying high-gaining Angus bulls at the Northwest Kansas Bull Test Station in Colby, not far from the family farm south of Oberlin.

In 1970, when neighbor Dale Barton wanted to retire, the Moores agreed to rent his farmland and to buy the small but well-managed Ellendale Angus registered cow herd. They already liked the way Angus crossbreds fed in the home lots compared to straight Herefords, and now they began to see advantages in the consistent results of straightbred Angus feeders.

"By the early 1980s, we were pretty much all Angus," Moore says. Loyd and Melvin had split the partnership, and Monte took on a more active management role in growing the herd to more than 300 spring-calving and 100 fall-calving cows. Later in the decade, another uncle, Francis, joined the cattle enterprises, along with brother-in-law Mike Coleman on the extensive crop side of the operation.

The depressed farm economy and high interest rates in those years led the family to consider alternatives to buying so many unknown calves to feed each fall.

"That was a high-stakes game, borrowing money to feed 2,000 cattle. So we thought we would own more cows that we knew about and feed out what we could," Moore says.

He recalls those days "before the EPD [expected progeny difference] era, when you were looking at bulls and trying to guess." They never succumbed to the lure of Continental genetics but did try Brangus bulls on heifers once.

"That didn't work too well, and we tried not to keep any influence in the herd," Moore says. Rather than keep substandard replacements, he admits to buying a stock-trailer load of outside females, but just once. Otherwise, expansion has come from within.

Better insight

It wasn't always easy to find the bulls they wanted. "Conformation was important to Dad, and he always stressed that we had to keep the thickness of muscling when we bought those high-gaining bulls," Moore says. "We could still find them in the early

'80s, but then we got into an era where Angus got bigger and leaner.”

Fortunately for Moore's plans, the EPD era began, and they began to incorporate multi-trait selection, looking at milk as well as weaning weight and yearling weight EPDs. “We never had a problem or a shortage there — probably thanks to those foundation cows — so we kept milk EPD in the 10 to 20 range,” he says. “Our herd evolved with the EPDs; we use them all.”

In the late 1980s, the search for practical Angus bulls led to business relationships with several seedstock producers who kept a focus on cow function, easy fleshing and other non-EPD factors in addition to the balance Moore sought in bulls.

Heifer-bull selection ideas changed as opportunities allowed, from the guesswork of 20 years ago to single-trait selection for “low, low birth weight” to today's standard of zero birth weight EPD, less than 20 milk, more than 50 yearling weight and positive for marbling, ribeye area and scrotal circumference.

“We look for the complete package now,” Moore says. “When they (the American Angus Association) came up with the marbling EPD, and as we incorporated that, it did become more of a challenge to go through the catalogs, finding the ones that have the look and all the numbers and that you can afford pricewise.”

Moore saw the seedstock industry take big strides in yearling weight EPD over the last five years, and his selection standards are edging higher — but not at the expense of predictability. “I'm not sure about those really big spreads between birth weight and yearling,” he says.

“I watch those curve benders, but I have to see that the sire and dam numbers are similar and that the increase is supported equally by both sides of the pedigree. Rather than creating an average out of extremes, we think we get more consistency with bulls created out of higher



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Individual data

The Moores recognized early that individual carcass data was important. Starting in the late 1980s, grading reports revealed only a couple of Standard carcasses in the early going, and those cows were culled. Similarly, the herd rarely produces a Yield Grade (YG) 4, and those typically are Prime carcasses.

“We have selected for known performance in all areas for more than 10 years,” Moore says, “but our data is not in a package the way it should be.” Like many busy producers with the right idea, he simply hasn't found time to enter data into a program for historical indexing.

Until now, the data have been scanned visually for outliers. “Looking down through the list, we make culling decisions or look for reasons. Was a light carcass the last one born? Why was a carcass Select? Maybe we can go back and see if that cow produced Select carcasses before.” Now that USDA Choice or better takes in 90%-95% of the farm's calf crop, cows that

can't produce progeny grading above Select have a questionable future.

“I look at the time we can save by incorporating carcass data, and I know we need to get all of this on a computer program,” he says. “We can find those lines that are giving us the *Certified Angus Beef*[™] (CAB[®]) and Prime carcasses with backfat on the low side so we can produce Yield Grade 2s and 3s.”

It isn't practical to rank several hundred cows over several years' data without a computer, so this year he plans to purchase a cow-calf records program or to begin working with the Angus Beef Records Service (BRS).

“If we use the tools available, I know we can catch up and stay up,” Moore says.

Herd improvement

Considering the scope and pace of herd improvement, it's no wonder human analysis and memory are strained. For 10 years, heifers have been artificially inseminated with the best balanced-EPD bulls available, criteria advancing over the last few years to where heifer calves born to first-calf heifers are among the best available. To further accelerate progress, Moore uses the latest genetics in

new herd sires on his second-calf heifers.

“I like it that every female we raise has the potential to go back into the herd, provided she meets pelvic criteria and everything else — and, now we can say, provided she is supported by carcass data from half brothers,” Moore says.

The CAB acceptance rate has climbed steadily over the years as the rewards have grown. Counting purchased feeders in the mix, Moore figures that rate is currently “pushing 40%.”

The fall steers sold in December with 55% making CAB or Prime and no Yield Grade 4s. On the U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) grid, that meant carcass values as high as \$132/hundredweight (cwt.). The market moved sharply higher in the following weeks, but Moore says, “we always pull the plug plenty early,” and he doesn't make a practice of waiting for a market.

He did sell 49 bred heifers in January for more than \$1,000/head, and he may sell a few more later depending on market and grass prospects.

All the 2000 calves were weaned early due to drought, and the fall calves were on a

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growing ration for 120 days prior to full feed and ended up three weeks older than the previous year's summer-weaned fall calves by the time they were harvested. Moore believes that helped in achieving the record-high quality grades for progeny from his herd, but he is confident the genetics continue to improve, too.

The Moores first added the fall herd when cow numbers were growing beyond the facilities' capability to absorb more spring calvers. However, the advantage in spreading marketing risk and bull investment has earned fall calving a permanent spot in the enterprise.

Top bulls

"I don't have a problem spending quite a lot of money on a bull We know we can't AI (artificially inseminate) everything, and we want to advance just as fast with the

mature cow herd as with heifers," Moore explains. "I've seen what bulls in the top 20% to 30% value in the sales can do in our herd, and I would advise anybody who doesn't like to spend money on bulls, it's worth it." He says sale prices are invariably driven by the combination of balanced EPDs and outstanding appearance.

"I feel pretty good when the ones I pick out top the sale because a lot of other good producers must be thinking the same way," Moore says. "Looks are important, but it's better to have the numbers without the looks than looks without the numbers. Of course, terminal crossing comes into the picture at those sales, and that changes things, too." But Moore doesn't bid on those prospects.

He aims to continue increasing carcass value and building a reputation as a source of commercial breeding females.

As data analysis reveals more about his cattle in the coming years, Moore welcomes the computer's help in evaluating new herd bulls within a calf crop or two. "We will identify the cow families that do it all. Maybe we have to sacrifice some carcass performance, but we've already seen it just by scanning the data. We have outstanding cows that produce those outstanding steers. They're out there; we just have to identify them better."

There is no alternative to progress in aiming for higher quality, Moore says. "With all of the high-quality Angus in the alliances and the CAB Program, the averages in the market keep edging higher, raising the bar for all of us as we go. It helps bring consumers back to beef, but it also means you can't stand still," he says.

Down the road a couple of years, Moore looks to capitalize on increased data analysis,

opportunities in the cattle cycle, technology and the quality assurance of a closed herd. "We're looking at testing our cows for Johne's Disease and only buying bulls from tested herds as one more positive trait we can offer heifer buyers," he explains.

With past data incorporated into herd indexing, Moore plans strategic downsizing to the most efficient, quality-producing cows in 2003-2004, providing another boost in the percentage of progeny qualifying for CAB. Beyond that, he's waiting for sexed semen to provide the capability of expanding rapidly into the next high-value wave of the cattle cycle later in this decade.

"Things are really going to change," he says. "It's amazing what you can do if you can just keep up."

