

# Call 'em By Name

If they're Angus, and you know it, insist on their being advertised as such.

Commentary by **Steve Suther**

**A**ngus producers, it's time to take back what's yours.

For about a century, everyone knew the black-hided cattle across America were Angus or Angus-based crossbreds. Then the Continental invasion saw many Angus cows produce registered half-Angus blacks as foundation stock for other breeds. Steer counterparts could fit into pens with traditionally-colored Continentals and fool some of the buyers, some of the time.

Naturally, with the advent of longer-legged black cattle, producers who stayed with Angus genetics put more emphasis on frame. By the 1990s, there were many Angus sires capable of producing extreme frame. The stage was set for greater confusion.

Some said Angus was trying to be "Continental"; the reverse was obviously true. Show steers had to be black-hided to win. Some breeders of Continentals found their niche in "homozygous polled, homozygous black purebreds," tracing back to Angus origins. A few calves with these phenotypes retained enough Angus-influence carcass genetics to marble.

Since 1978, the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program had been cultivating greater demand for registered Angus bulls. Then, as now, it started with the live-animal specifications — at least 51% black hide — to be eligible for the carcass evaluation and the eight key specifications that designate *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) product. Everyone aiming for that target used registered Angus bulls with above-average carcass traits.

## Premiums appear

After many years of building demand for the CAB product, licensed packers began to

pay premiums to get enough supply. About that time, and not by coincidence, Angus calves at auction began to sell at a premium to other breeds. Information was not nearly the key to value that it has become today, so there was a lot of speculation on all black-hided calves.

Auction market managers worked with producers of all different breeds and crosses, including those who were seeing the value of their calves falter as Angus came on strong. Meanwhile, universities began studying the change in relative calf values,

documenting premiums for "black and black-whiteface." The latter were usually represented as "bwf."

Somewhere along the line, Angus lost identity in the commercial sector, to the point that the most they could hope for was a reference among the commodities as being "good black cattle." Universities, cattle associations, auctions and allied industry all contributed to the blurring by avoiding the "A" word, due

to a combination of uncertainty and breed politics.

Angus may have been growing in dominance, but in most areas producers of other breeds mustered a significant share of business. Some of them also sold black-hided calves that were several crosses removed from Angus. So it was that millions of Angus calves were consigned, studied and analyzed as black/bwf.

It's starting to change, but nothing happens over night. Looking at a weekly farm paper I find consignments of "Blk,

Bwf, Hereford, Char, Braunvieh-x and Simm-x" in a typical auction market ad.

Other ads include variations such as "black-cross steers and heifers," "outstanding black heifers bred to low-birth-weight black bulls," and "strictly fancy black and bwf." One advertises consignments of "blacks, Chars, reds and other breeds," while another touts a "Special Black-Hided Calf Sale."

Then I see what I hope are trendsetters. In addition to the usual mention of other breeds, one ad describes "Angus and Angus-cross calves," "Hereford-x-Angus," and "Angus steers from ... Ranch." In this ad, "black crossbred steers" tells me these are of less Angus influence. It would be even more of a customer service to follow mention of black calves with strong Continental influence by naming that breed.

Another ad is careful to specify "Black Angus," perhaps because they also sell "Red Angus." But I think it would be clear to refer simply to "Angus" and "Red Angus," because those are the breed names, and no producer is going to assume Angus are red unless specified.

## Along for the ride

Other breed associations enjoy a good relationship with the American Angus Association. Many of them base part of their advertising strategy on pointing out the advantages of crossing with Angus. And in some cases that represents a step back from promoting an image of "big, black-hided cattle."

Now the stage is set for a more honest marketplace where information leaves behind the old days of fooling buyers. In the absence of explicit directions from you, the Angus producer, your calves are still being painted with a broad, black commodity brush. They deserve better. You deserve a better shot at a growing, documented premium for cattle of known Angus genetics. Take action.

Change a few words in the children's song, "If you're happy and you know it." If they're Angus, and you know it, insist on their being advertised as such — not merely as "good black cattle." Don't stand for commodity treatment if you have something more than that.



**Steve Suther**

