

Setting Your Direction with SIRE SELECTION

Improving quality one decision at a time.

by Miranda Reiman, Certified Angus Beef LLC; photos courtesy Certified Angus Beef LLC and American Angus Association

“In the early years — I’ll never forget it — people would refer to us as, ‘You’re one of those carcass breeders,’” says Bill Rishel, long-time North Platte, Neb., Angus producer.

It’s unclear if that label bothered him more then or when he hears it still today.

“My answer was always, ‘No. We’re cattle breeders, and we bred these cattle to be functionally sound and to be reproductive and to perform.’”

It’s never been an “either/or” choice. During the rancher’s decades in the Angus business, he mated some of the early carcass bulls that have had a lasting impact.

Work started before expected progeny differences (EPDs) were being used as breeding tools.

“We knew through industry research that the heritabilities for carcass traits were reasonably high. The higher the heritability, you knew if you had a way of selecting these cattle that you could make reasonable progress. I think we were at least armed with that concept,” he remembers.

Rishel participated in his first structured sire evaluation in 1986, as the age of breeding by the numbers was dawning.

“Even then, some of those EPDs were new. They didn’t have a huge discovery population in the breed that you could compare to,” Rishel says. *Continued on page 38*

Bill Rishel has long had the consumer in mind, but spending more time with chefs and others who sell beef has cemented that focus.



“Even when bulls were identified as high-marbling, they were so few and far between that it was difficult to find high-marbling bulls who had all these other traits in balance. The availability of that today is so superior to the 1990s that there’s no comparison.”

Bill Rishel,
North Platte, Neb., Angus producer



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Focused breeding program

In the early 1980s, Brian McCulloh, Viroqua, Wis., was playing the Computer Cow game in an animal breeding class at Iowa State University, where he learned the potential for genetic progress when a cattleman embraces a focused breeding program.

“It’s under the category of ‘the truth can’t be told; it has to be discovered,’” he says.

McCulloh joined Woodhill Farms as managing partner in 1984, so he and Angus EPDs basically grew up together, but he had confidence in them right away.

“I thought that the three value propositions Angus cattle brought to this industry were calving ease, marbling and the convenience traits of the Angus female,” he says. Searching the Angus sire summary for bulls that would do it all, he put pressure on all three at the same time.

Like Rishel, McCulloh says, “I cringe at the description of a ‘carcass program.’”

Maybe the early pioneers are still sensitive to the term because so few focused on carcass quality in the beginning.

“Even when bulls were identified as high-marbling, they were so few and far between that it was difficult to find high-marbling bulls who had all these other traits in balance,” Rishel says. “The availability of that today is so superior to the 1990s that there’s no comparison.”

The average marbling EPD for sires born in 1990 is 0.23, compared to Rishel’s famous B/R New Design 036, born that year with a marbling EPD that would rise over time to



Brian McCulloh, Woodhill Farms, says he used to consider marbling a threshold trait, until he started seeing the premiums stack up for producing the Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand and CAB Prime.

0.86 today. It’s safe to say 036 was in the top 1% for marbling then; he’s in the top 25% today. He ranked above average in other traits, as well.

Some of the early “high-marbling” bulls weren’t known for balance or other strengths.

“People would say, ‘You select for marbling and those cattle are just hard-doing. They’re frail. They don’t have any meat on them,’” Rishel says. “Well, they just picked the wrong ones.”

At the time there were no packer premiums for carcass merit, and “red meat yield” was the anthem of the day, but the march toward progress was under way, albeit slow and steady in those early years.

Making progress

The Angus genetic trend for marbling tells that story. The average marbling in the breed lingered from 0.2 to 0.3 from the 1970s until it finally climbed above that 0.3 mark in 2000. Today, it’s 0.58 for cattle born in 2017.

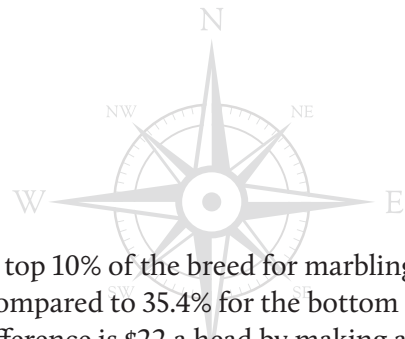
That begs the question: If it took registered breeders three decades to make that kind of improvement, how much difference can a change in the bull battery make in 2018?

It’s not always a quick process to add marbling, says Justin Sexten, director of supply development for Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB), but there are more tools today, and the way to make change is more defined.

He modeled data to show the significance of sire selection and how it can either derail or amplify quality grade goals. The analysis assumes an average Angus cow herd, based on the



“The rate of progress, you can decide,” says Justin Sexten, director of supply development for CAB.



breed average marbling EPD of 0.48, using an average parent sire with a marbling EPD of 0.49 today. A producer could choose to buy a better sire at the top 25% of the breed for marbling, remain the same at average or downgrade to the bottom 75%.

“This simulation assumes you’re average in every way, from the cows to the sires at hand,” Sexten says, noting that most people don’t know where exactly their herds are. This model used industry-wide data and applied those carcass metrics, giving people a snapshot of where they could be. “But if they’ve not paid attention to marbling in their bull selection, they’re on the wrong side of that curve.”

For the bull from the upper quartile of the breed, approximately 46% of progeny will qualify for the Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand, including 6.3% Prime, compared to 38.3% CAB (4.9% Prime) for the lowest quartile. That’s an estimated \$12.06 difference per head, top-to-bottom.

“If I say, ‘Well, I’m just going to stick with the bull I have,’ then not making a decision is a decision,” says Sexten. “You are choosing not to move forward.”

That gets even more dramatic when comparing the effect of using a sire at the top 10% level to one at the lowest end, where 90% are better for marbling EPDs. The expected CAB and Prime for calves from

bulls in the top 10% of the breed for marbling would be 48.7%, compared to 35.4% for the bottom tenth.

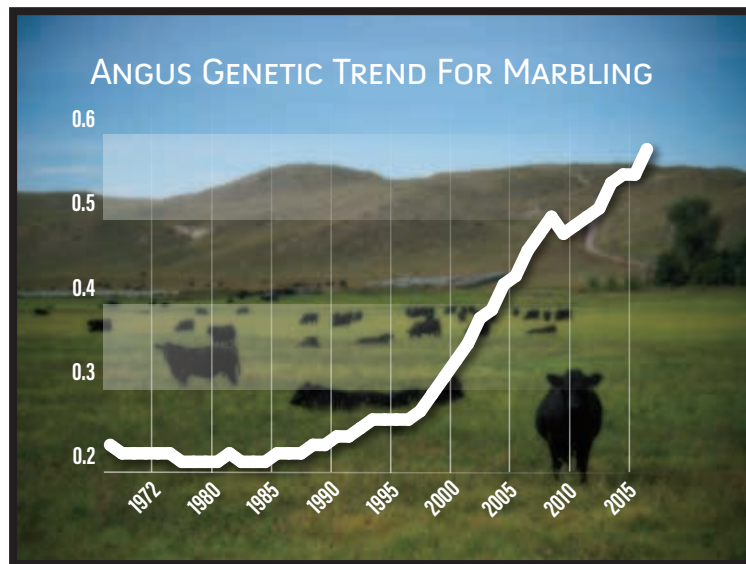
“That difference is \$22 a head by making a good decision versus a bad one,” Sexten says. It’s an \$11-per-head advantage just going from average up to the top 10%, and an \$11-per-head drop to do the opposite. It might not sound like that much, until you look at it over the bull’s lifetime.

“What is the cost of not making progress?” he

asks. “While it looks like only \$11 today, the idea that you’ve given up progress toward your 10-year goal is far more costly. You’ve lost time, which is something none of us can make more of.”

Not to mention the effect on the cow herd.

“When talking the impact of that bull ... the compound effect is only realized with the retention of the females,” McCulloh says, noting that gets



The average marbling in the breed lingered from 0.2 to 0.3 until about 2000. Now, the average is 0.58 for cattle born in 2017 once selection for marbling was more understood.

some of the credit for the recent spike in national quality grading trends. “We now have all those daughters of Angus bulls in production.”

Working on genetics from both sides is the best way to speed progress.

“They’re going to have to get this marbling influence into the cow herd to continue to use bulls that have marbling. It becomes a lot easier to have higher-marbling cattle when they’re getting it from both sides of the pedigree,” Rishel says.

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The model shows marbling as the only trait that moves, and Sexten admits there are a lot of other considerations.

“We don’t want to endorse single-trait selection, but it works for this illustration,” he says. “The more traits one chooses to focus on, the less progress one can make, but the takeaway for me is that progress is slow and requires constant focus.”

To improve marbling, you don’t have to find a bull in the top 1%. Just finding a bull that’s higher than what you have today will move your herd in the right direction, he says.

“The rate of progress, you can decide, but set yourself up to always be making progress,” Sexten says.

If given the choice in selecting between two similar yearling bulls, going with the bull having higher marbling is a bit of an insurance policy, too.

“If you only use one in the 50th percentile and he would happen to change downward instead of upward one standard deviation, that means he’s going to put less marbling in your herd than maybe you were hoping for,” Rishel says.

Genomics allow for more-accurate EPDs at the very start, but potential changes as more data accumulate could still be the difference between adding to carcass quality or detracting from it. When advising commercial customers, the breeders say it helps to know a little about where the herd is now in terms of marbling.

“Every situation is different,” Rishel says. “If they’re in more of a Continental-cross herd of cows

and they want to put marbling in there, it would behoove them to seek out bulls they like that are the highest-marbling bulls they can buy.”

Having some carcass data, or at least background on past sires used, helps explain their situation, too.

“If breeders are selling bulls to a commercial man who has a mixed-up cow herd and they’d like to get more consistent, he can’t put too much marbling in a bull,” Rishel says. “If he gets all the other functional and performance traits reasonably balanced, the one trait I have yet to see a negative impact to is marbling.”



B/R New Design 036

The upside potential seems to keep growing, McCulloh says.

“There for a while, I will concede that I thought marbling was a threshold trait,” he says. Choice was good enough. But now?

“I didn’t set out as a breeder 30 years ago to raise Prime cattle, but it’s starting to be a lucrative goal. I see the value proposition of

Angus cattle to global beef production is their ability to consistently add quality,” the breeder notes.

Perhaps one of the biggest threats to CAB brand supply is the idea that the average Angus population has enough marbling now, so there’s no need to select for it, Sexten says.

In response to that line of thought, Rishel warns, “If you have a high heritability for a trait, you can take it out just as fast as you can put it in.”

It changes in just one generation. Which way will it move in your herd this year? **AJ**

Editor’s Note: Miranda Reiman is director of producer communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

DO IT FOR The Customers



It was a simple yes-or-no, three-question survey. Bill Rishel's customers filled it out while they waited for their traditional sale-day meal of beef and noodles.

The answer Rishel got back helped cement the quality focus he'd added to his Angus herd.

The only question he remembers is: "Do you retain any portion of your calf crop through the feedlot phase?"

About one-third of their customers said "yes."

"That was about 1986, and that actually blew my mind. I thought it might be 10% or 15%," he says.

"I firmly believed that it made sense if our commercial men would ever decide to feed their cattle and try to get the value of these cattle, we were going to have to step out in

front of this thing and provide them with the genetics that would help them get it done."

Years later he invested in some of the initial shares of U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) and watched the evolution.

"It took a lot longer than I ever dreamed it would for value-added marketing and grids and all that to take hold," the breeder says, but the end payout is worth it.

"Early on, I figured out if you didn't have somebody to spend their hard-earned money to buy this product and pull it through the system, it wasn't going to work for anybody," he says. "That's been proven to no end nowadays." **AJ**



When his customers started retaining ownership of their calves, says Nebraska cattleman Bill Rishel, he knew it was time to supply carcass genetics.



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- 2 Corner Stone Genetics Online Sexed Heifer Embryo Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Raymond, OH
- 3 Double R Bar Ranch Angus Bull Sale, Plymouth, IN
- 3 Wilde Angus Production Sale, Shevlin, MN
- 4 Brede-meier Angus Farms First Annual Bull and Female Production Sale, in conjunction with the State Stockyards Commercial Female Sale, Falls City, NE
- 4 Crouch Angus Valley Sale, Clarinda, IA
- 4 Payne Angus Ranch First Production Sale, Kaw City, OK
- 6 Ascent Angus Farm Online Production Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Oakland, IL
- 6 Cornwell Farms Production Sale, St. John, KS, sale at LaCrosse Livestock Market, LaCrosse, KS
- 6 Jindra Angus 18th Annual Production Sale, Clarkson, NE, sale at Creighton, NE
- 8 McCurry Angus Ranch Bull Sale, Burrton, KS
- 9 Christensen Angus Production Sale, Okarche, OK
- 9 Reid Angus Ranch Bull Sale, Akron, CO
- 9 (N) Schlager Angus Production Sale, Canton, MO, sale at Palmyra, MO
- 10 Sunnyhill Angus 28th Annual Production Sale, Fairview, IL
- 10 Tennessee Agribition Angus Sale, Lebanon, TN
- 10 Valley Oaks Angus Sale, at Kingsville, MO
- 12 Horstman Cattle Co. Online Angus Embryo Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, West Lafayette, IN
- 13 Wheatland Farms Angus Sale, Hope, KS
- 14 Minnesota Angus Breeders' Sale, at Olmsted County Fairgrounds, Rochester, MN
- 15 Davenport Angus Online Embryo Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Wagner, SD
- 15 DBL Angus Bull Sale, Fullerton, NE
- 15 McKellar Angus Annual Spring Production Sale, Mt. Pleasant, TX
- 16 Corner Stone Genetics Online Sexed Heifer Embryo Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Raymond, OH
- 17 East Tennessee Angus Association 100th Annual Sale, at University of TN, Knoxville, TN
- 17 Molitor Angus Farm 39th Annual Sale, Zenda, KS
- 17 Musgrave Angus 23rd Annual Sale, Griggsville, IL
- 17 Smith Angus Farm/Predestined Cattle Co. Annual Production Sale, Wadley, GA
- 18 2K Cattle Enterprises Angus Sale, Glen Haven, WI
- 18 April Valley Farm Performance-Tested Angus Bull and Female Sale, Leavenworth, KS, sale at St. Joseph, MO
- 18 LC Land & Cattle Online Angus Bull Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Noble, OK
- 19 Almond Angus Ranch Production Sale, Vinita, OK, sale at Coffeyville, KS
- 20 Double Diamond Angus Online Production Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Chrisman, IL
- 20 Quirk Land and Cattle Sale, Hastings, NE
- 21 Four Corners Farms Online Angus Production Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, St. Francisville, IL
- 22 Glasoe Angus Production Sale, Wildrose, ND, sale at Sitting Bull Livestock Auction, Williston, ND
- 22 Hurlbut Cattle Co. Angus Bull and Female Sale, held at Glacial Lakes Livestock, Watertown, SD
- 22 KY-TN Performance-Tested Bull Sale, held at Farmers Livestock Market, Glasgow, KY
- 22 McCabe Genetics Angus Bull and Commercial Female Sale, Elk City, KS
- 22 Stertzbach Cattle Co. Online Angus Show Heifer Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Louisville, OH
- 23 (N) Joe Hammell's Freeburg Ridge Angus Performance-Tested Bull Sale, Caledonia, MN
- 24 Kramer Farms Performance-Tested Angus Bull and Female Sale, Farina, IL
- 24 Sauk Valley Angus Bull Sale, Rock Falls, IL
- 24 Whitestone Pasture-Performance-Tested Angus Bull Sale, Aldie, VA
- 25 Leary Brothers Angus Sale, Caledonia, MN
- 25 York Farms Annual Angus Sale, Palestine, IL
- 26 Nowatzke Cattle Co. Online Angus Show Heifer and Embryo Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Michigan City, IN
- 27 ADR Cattle Co. Bull Sale, Atkinson, NE
- 27 Dameron Angus Farm Online Fall Heifer Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Lexington, IL
- 28 Colburn Cattle Co. Online Angus Fall Show Heifer Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Visalia, CA
- 28/29 Rock River Angus Complete Dispersal, Chappell, NE
- 29 High Point Farms Online Angus Show Heifer Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Wyandot, IL
- 29 Sankey's 6N Ranch Angus Show Heifer and Embryo Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Council Grove, KS
- 30 Corner Stone Genetics Online Sexed Heifer Embryo Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Raymond, OH
- 30 Pennsylvania's Finest Female Sale Volume XXIII, at Livestock Evaluation Center, Furnace, PA
- 31 D&W Angus Sale, Hartwell, GA
- 31 Premier Breeders Group First Angus Production Sale, Hillsboro, KY
- 31 Wood Angus Bull and Elite Female Sale, Willow Spring, NC

April

- 3 Womack Cattle Enterprises Online Show Heifer/Replacement Female Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Pembroke, KY
- 4 2J Angus Annual Bull and Female Sale, Dunlap, IA
- 4 Schafer Stock Farm Online Angus Female Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Owaneco, IL
- 4 Sunrise Sunset Angus Online Show Heifer Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Modoc, IN
- 5 Top Line Farms Online Angus Show Heifer Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Tremont, IL
- 6 Southeast Elite Female Sale, Perry, GA
- 6 Springlake Angus and Guests Angus Sale, Lynch, NE
- 7 Angus Opportunity 29th Anniversary Sale, at Buckner & Jeffries Angus Farm, Canmer, KY
- 7 Grassy Valley Performance-Tested Angus Bull and Female Sale, Greeneville, TN
- 8 Northern Indiana Angus Breeders' Sale, Logansport, IN
- 9 (N) Brockmere Farms 24th Annual Angus Bull and Female Sale, Brookfield, MO, sale at New Cambria, MO
- 9 Cherry Knoll Farms Online Show Heifer Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, West Grove, PA
- 10 Mark Davis Family Angus Online Production Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Shelbyville, TN
- 11 Miller Family Farms Online Show Heifer Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Decatur, TN
- 14 Blubaugh Angus Ranch Pride of the Pasture Sale, Tonakawa, OK
- 14 Conley Angus Bull and Female Sale, Clarksdale, MO
- 17 Wilson Cattle Co. Online Show Heifer Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Cloverdale, IN
- 20 Pine Creek Angus Ranch 99th Anniversary Sale, Faith, SD
- 21 Georgia Genetics Annual Production Sale, hosted by Britt Angus, Hartwell, GA
- 21 (N) Wisconsin Angus Breeders' Futurity Sale, at Jackson County Fairgrounds, Black River Falls, WI
- 22 Quintin Smith Family and Guests Angus Sale, Lebanon, TN
- 24 Anne Patton Schubert Online Show Heifer Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Taylorsville, KY
- 27 McKean Brothers Performance-Tested Angus Bull and Female Sale, Mercer, PA
- 28 Hallstrand Performance Angus Bull and Female Sale, Prentice, WI
- 28 Ogden Angus Ranch Second Semi-Annual Production Sale, Lockwood, MO
- 28 Performance Legends Angus Female Sale, at Shuffer Farm, Union Grove, NC
- 28 Pleasant Hill Farms Sweet Sixteen Online Heifer Calf Sale, Hosted by Angus Live, Rockfield, KY

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