

Small Breeders, Big Opportunity

Cattlemen say a large herd size is not a prerequisite to success.

by Miranda Reiman, director of digital content and strategy

When looking at the numbers, the Angus breed is big, dwarfing all other breeds in almost all the measures: registrations, data collection and size of membership. Looking at the stats, it could be easy to think *The Business Breed* is all about big business. How is a smaller operation to compete amongst a sea of vast ranches and large herd sizes?

In reality, there's a lot of diversity in the Angus breed. American Angus Association's 2022 fiscal year data showed 77% of members registered less than 20 head per year. Around 34% of the registrations came from cow herds of less than 50 head, and almost half came from herds of 100 head or less.

Equal opportunity

Joe Myers, Harrodsburg, Ky., is one of those. He operates Myers Angus Farm with his family, where they juggle off-farm jobs and their 75-head Angus herd.

Economies of scale aren't in their favor, he said, but many of the breed's

advantages are size-neutral.

"I think I use most of the tools available ... they play a huge role in our program in terms of breeding and marketing," Myers said, naming everything from Pasture to Publish to the Angus Mobile App. They participate in Angus Herd Improvement

Records (AHIR[®]) and collect DNA to get genomically enhanced expected progeny differences (EPDs). "Even though it's a small operation, all of those things fit what we're doing."

Myers was an early adopter of that technology because it took what were otherwise small contemporary groups — especially once broken into spring- and fall-calving herds — and compared them against the entire Angus population.

"It's not a contemporary group for our herd in AHIR, it didn't expand that, but it sure did expand our comparison of how all the other genotyped cattle were performing, and I can see it getting more accurate the more data we get in."

There's equal opportunity to make

cattle better, he said, just like there's no minimum number of head to have good facilities.

Keeping the peace

Myers' work for a genetic company finds him on the road many days out of the year. It's imperative anybody in the family can work cattle.

"You don't have to have fancy facilities, but they have to be set up right," Myers said. "That's not just the working chute and the facilities. It's the kind of fencing and the whole farm layout, where everything can be handled and the cattle can be moved with one person, if need be. Everyone's at much better peace when things happen easily."

Scott Anderson, Chrisman, Ill., puts an exclamation point on that.

"I agree 100%," Anderson said. "We are limited on labor, so we had to make ours user-friendly."

He started Double Diamond Genetics three decades ago, doing embryo transfer (ET) work throughout Illinois and Indiana. The Anderson family grew Double Diamond Angus alongside that

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business and now raise 60 head, split between a fall- and spring-calving group. Their primary focus is the show cattle business.

“I’ll be on the road putting embryos in, collecting cows, and I’ve got my wife and son at home, they’re taking care of the cattle at home and feeding,” Anderson said. “They’re giving shots to donors plus taking care of the show barn or breaking cows. It’s got to be simplified the way you’re set up.”

David Gazda, Association director of field services and regional manager in the Southeast, said labor is a common concern he hears as he travels across the country.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re a family-owned operation or a larger operation, time is limited. You have to be organized,” Gazda said, suggesting creative solutions to the crunch.

Hiring help from a student organization, such as an FFA program or employing summer interns could ease some of the burden. He also suggests building a “team” from nutritionists and veterinarians to those who can help promote the program.

“Have some outside voices to be able to help you,” Gazda said.

With fewer head to spread investments over, you’ve got to be strategic in the spend, he says.

Marketing a few at a time

“Some people are good at marketing, some aren’t,” adds Casey Jentz, regional manager for Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin. “That’s where we talk about strategic partners and being able to have some help with things that you need that you maybe aren’t an expert in.”

When new customers seek out an operation, they’re going to do some research, he said.

“They’ve talked to other people about you, they’ve looked at what you’ve got for cattle, they’ve studied you on the internet, and if they can’t find anything, they’re probably going to move on to somebody else.”

That’s why having a web presence is so important, Jentz said, noting Angus Media provides that and many other advertising options as a service to breeders.

Social media and increased use of online sales has changed the game for those with fewer head to market.

“You can put yourself out there. You can have an actual auction on your animals, and you can do it in a cost-effective way,” Jentz said.

Anderson sells most of his animals private treaty or in special online sales, partially because it allows some flexibility in the timeline, too.

“Each sale is a little different,” Anderson said. “We’ve made mistakes along the way; and we’ve probably made about every mistake along the way; but we try and self-correct.”

Myers said a production sale would not be feasible for their family to execute with their current head count. Instead, they’ve found partners on both their bull and female sales.

“When you put two people working together in the same direction, you cover a lot more ground,” he said.

Myers suggests the keys to a good partnership include finding someone you trust and having breeding programs that are well-aligned.

Make it personal

The final link in marketing is following up with good customer service. This is a place Myers thinks the small breeder may have a competitive advantage.

“We’re there for the cattle, but the people portion is the most important part,” Myers said. With fewer

customers, annual herd visits are easier to accomplish, he notes.

“Some make their living from the cattle business, but many are making their living from another source,” Myers said. “Those folks are the ones that have the most questions, and it takes spending time with them to answer those questions.”

Many of their repeat buyers don’t need a bull every year, so it’s all about keeping the connection across multiple breeding seasons.

For Anderson, that means paying attention to where those buyers plan to take those cattle.

“We try to help them prepare cattle at the show. We consult with them as far making nutrition decisions and that possibly breeding and those parts of the program. [They] definitely appreciate when you come out and show an interest post-sale,” he said.

It’s the same principles, no matter the size of the operation. There are just nuances to how they’re applied depending on each situation.

“The best thing about our Angus breed is there’s so many types and kinds of Angus cattle that nobody has to do the same thing, and we can all make a good living at it,” Jentz said. **AJ**

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to hear directly from Joe Myers or visit www.angusjournal.net



Editor’s note: All four spoke as part of the “Small Herd, Big Opportunity,” session during Angus University at the 2022 Angus Convention in Salt Lake City, Utah. For more convention coverage, see previous editions or visit www.angusjournal.net.