



Nick Wehrmann (left) and Richard McClung work together to set realistic goals for their Angus herd.

A Realistic Approach

Wehrmann Angus has put together an Angus herd based on traits of economic importance and real cow business thinking.

by Janet Mayer

In the sparsely furnished office of the old blue horse barn, Nick Wehrmann and Richard McClung sit sipping strong black coffee and munching store-bought doughnuts. The odor of kerosene from the small heater in the center of the room and the aroma of fresh brewed coffee make a strange combination of smells. Under the table holding the coffee-maker, a field mouse with teddy-bear ears boldly

scampers around.

Wehrmann, owner of Wehrmann Angus of New Market, Va., and his managing cattle partner are discussing the semi-annual Wehrmann Performance Sale held at the farm the prior week.

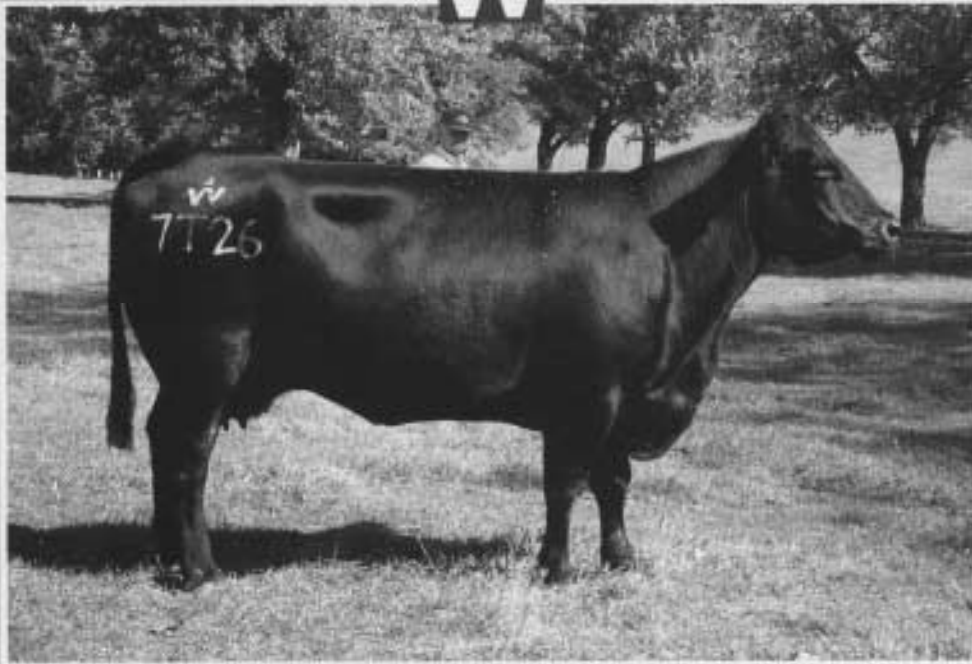
"We feel good about our sales," says McClung in his resonant southern drawl. "We don't sell cattle for a lot of money, but we sell a lot of cattle for realistic money. The demand for our cattle is good.

The sales are short, with no gimmicks, giveaways or champagne breakfasts. We sold 50 female lots in an hour and a half and every dollar was collected."

According to McClung, the sale average was a respectable \$2,420, with most of the cattle being sold to repeat buyers. "The first lots always sell high, but the middle cattle are usually sold to repeat buyers, or to people who came to the sale on the advice of the repeat

buyers. The middle cattle are dollar-right and will work to make money for the buyers."

Although many customers of Wehrmann cattle are repeat buyers, the operation still favors national advertising as a necessary part of marketing. Wehrmann advises that you have to have something worthy of selling before you advertise. He says breeders need to take a long-term approach to building their herd. A major mistake that



This outstanding cow, a Rito 149 daughter, is one of Wehrmann's favorites

many breeders make is to expect to sell their cattle for prices that the cattle don't warrant. He feels if they sell too early in the building process, they are usually selling cattle off the bottom end because they have to keep the top end to build their herd.

"We bred cattle for eight years, and I'll guarantee we didn't spend \$3,000 on advertising. We said nothing. There was no need to say anything; we weren't ready to talk about what we were doing," explains McClung.

"When we did start talking about it was when we could deliver," Wehrmann adds in his soft voice. "It wasn't that we couldn't have delivered some cattle before that; we just couldn't have sold enough cattle with the degree of security that we can now because of the genetics bred into the herd for the last seven or eight years.

The Wehrmann herd is promoted as a "Performance Brand," offering high performance-oriented seedstock. The cattle are basically line bred of the Rito bloodline. Outside bulls, such as Shoshone, Rito 2100, Scotch

Cap, New Trend, Tehama Bando and Traveler, are incorporated to strengthen traits already in the herd.

Known as one of the strongest pure milk herds in the Angus breed today, the Wehrmann herd has not been compromised in growth to reach the high milk levels. Their program possesses impressive EPDs of +15.0 milk and +45.3 yearling weight, while maintaining a relatively low birthweight EPD of +3.6 pounds.

From its inception in 1975, the Wehrmann Angus herd descended from what Wehrmann describes as a potpourri of pedigrees, beginning with the purchase of a registered Angus herd from Dr. Ralph Beard in Whigham, Ga. Earlier that year, Wehrmann, who worked in the textile industry, bought a hog farm in Cario, Ga., about nine miles north of the Florida state line.

"I had no background in agriculture at that point, but I always had an interest in it," recalls Wehrmann. "I was raised in Michigan and moved to North Carolina when I was

28. It was many years later when I saw the farm in Georgia. I liked it; so I bought it."

In direct contrast to Wehrmann's non-agricultural background, McClung had an extensive career in the purebred business before joining the Wehrmann operation. Born and reared in Lewisburg, W. Va., he had early exposure to the cattle industry with five purebred herds and the state fair located near his home.

"I guess you would have to say I kind of grew up in the midst of the purebred business," McClung says.

He attended the state university and entered the cattle business before graduation, when he bought 35 cows and an interest in an Angus bull from Conrad Grove of Downingtown, Pa.

After graduation in 1964, he was partner in a cattle operation and later managed various purebred cattle operations throughout the country. He met Martin Jorgensen, one of the initial breeders of Rito cattle, in 1969 when he bought a bull from him. Later that year, McClung hauled the first Rito cattle; the

bloodline he would later work with at Wehrmann, east of the Mississippi. He started to work at Wehrmann Angus on October 5, 1978.

Wehrmann says he didn't know anything about cattle when he bought the herd, but having an engineering background, he figured to apply mathematics to breeding.

"I liked what I saw in the Rito line of cattle, and decided to use the Rito line to clean up the pedigrees. Line breeding with Rito bloodline just seemed to make mathematical sense to me."

During 1976, Wehrmann added more cows to the herd, including a large group of Rito-bred cows from the Valentine herd in Georgia. One of these cows was to become the great-great-grandam of one of Wehrmann's nationally known sires, Rito 3L3, born in 1983, and Rita 5H11, the dam of Rito 8E8. Later that same year, a small group of cows was added from the Jorgensen's South Dakota herd. One of these cows became the maternal grandam of Rito 9J9, another nationally known sire, born in 1979.

Wehrmann recalls that when McClung came into the operation, Rito line bulls were already being used. "Essentially our breeding during the years prior to Richard's joining us was Rito 149, Rito 72, Rito 83 and Rito 36, with Rito 83 and Rito 36 used as backup bulls."

The following year they added Rito 111, out of a Rito 149 daughter, and Band 156, sired by Band 234 out of a Rito 149 daughter. Rito 111 and Rito 36 were used as backup bulls. Rito 149 and Rito 72 were full brothers in blood. This battery of bulls was used almost exclusively for the next four years.

They continued to layer line bred pedigrees, with the infusion of some outside bulls. But it is what happened back in 1976-79 that gave the depth

of genetics they now have in the Rito cattle.

In 1979, Band 156 sired Rito 9J9, which McClung describes as one of the good bulls with traits of economic importance born into the Angus breed.

"We released him to Select Sires," he says. "He died shortly thereafter, but is probably more popular today than he was then. I would guess Rito 9J9 is one of the top seven bulls to be born since 1970."

By the fall of 1980, only intensely line bred Rito bulls had been used for breeding. McClung says the decision was made to bring in an outside bulk; Shearbrook Shoshone was selected because of his solid growth and excellent maternal characteristics. Having an outstanding weaning ratio of 122 on seven calves, the Rito 087 cow was leased from Jorgensen Ranch and flushed to Shoshone.

In 1981, Shorito, another outstanding sire, was born as a result of the flush of the 087 cow and Shoshone.

Shearbrook Extra was also used that year on a select basis, and a more extensive program of layering pedigrees was begun for the purpose of producing progeny having superior milk characteristics as well as adequate growth characteristics.

Wehrmann says the next several years saw the emergence of many outstanding bulls and females from the herd. In 1982, Rito Rito, sired by 9J9 out of a Rito 178 daughter, was born and later sold at the side of his dam in Wehrmann's 1982 sale.

Rito 3L3, sired by Jetliner of Conanga out of Shorita 1B14, was born in 1983. Bred to Rito 9J9, she gave birth to Rita 5H11 in 1985. Rita 5H11's current EPDs of +6.2 birthweight, +41 weaning weight, +22 maternal and +69 yearling weight would have to



The Wehrmann homeplace, set in the scenic Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, was originally a plantation.

place her among the top cows in the Angus breed.

As a first calf heifer, Rita 5H11 gave birth to Rito 8E8, sired by Traveler. His current EPDs are +3.9 birthweight, +43 weaning weight, +19 maternal and +74 yearling weight. In conjunction with the University of Georgia, Rita 5H11 was successfully flushed to Leachman Fullback with a tremendous bull calf, Rito 9FB3 and five outstanding females resulting from the flush.

In **June 1986**, the entire Wehrmann herd was moved from Georgia to the present 1,320-acre farm in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. The fall calving program that was followed in Georgia was changed to a spring calving program. In the spring of 1986, the herd was bred to Rito 3L3, Rito Rito, Rito 9J9, Shorito Big Elban of Graham 1656 and New Trend. The following year Traveler was added to the herd roster. In 1988 Tehama Bando was added.

Most of the Wehrmann herd are considered homebred cattle with as high as six generations from one cow on the farm at one time. However, two or three outstanding cows of bloodlines related to what they have done, but of a little different relationship, have been added from outside herds.

McClung says he feels that sometimes the right outside cow is more valuable than an outside bull, especially if you already have good bulls that you breed to that cow.

Purchased in 1988 by Wehrmanns, Leachman Blackbird 2036, which stood as the top cow in the breed for pure milk EPDs was flushed to Scotch Cap. This flush resulted in retaining three top heifers and the outstanding bull calf, Rito 9M9, who is being leased to Select Sires.

"When we do use outside bulls, we don't use them very long," Wehrmann explains. "We will get a son out of one of our top cows and not use that bull again."

These sons are then bred to line bred Rito cows. Daughters of outside bulls are bred back to line bred Rito bulls. By using this mating scheme, a broad genetic base is maintained to incorporate or strengthen traits already in the herd without diluting the basic genetic pool.

"That is why you see the uniformity that we now have in our herd," Wehrmann says. "One of our buyers made the statement that he could close his eyes and bid on a cow and know it would be just as good as all of the other cows in the sale. That's what our breeding program is all about."

McClung considers EPDs to be one of the greatest tools

when breeding and merchandising cattle.

"Wehrmann Angus has used EPDs out the top," he says with a chuckle. "We are reaping the benefits of the EPD system, partly because of the kind of cattle we have bred and partly because we can document the fact that we have good cattle by using EPDs."

The Wehrmann herd has been in existence for only 16 years, which is considered a young herd of cattle.

Wehrmann says, however, the herd is genetically old because of turning generations so fast.

"Our initial goals were to get what we are approaching now," Wehrmann says.

"Actually we have worked toward three goals since the beginning. The first five-year, or short-term goal, was to line breed with some degree of predictability to get the Rito line of cattle that we wanted. One of the ways we achieved this was by A.I. breeding cows to our outstanding bulls and then using the same bulls for natural service backup. This not only has given us tremendous progress in our breeding program, but also has given about a 90 percent rate of getting our cows bred to the bulls we desire."

Another important part of the first phase was to strive for a herd of cattle with reasonable birthweights that could milk and raise a good big strong calf at weaning time. McClung says milk is one of the toughest things to have on a consistent basis; they have culled relentlessly because of lack of milk. The Wehrmann herd has developed into one of the top maternal herds in the country, ranking in the top one percent.

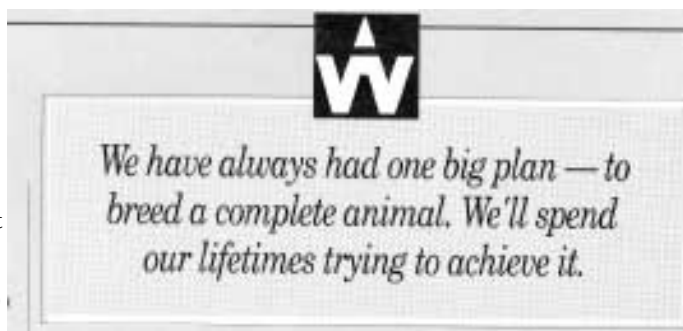
The intermediate goal, and a major one, was to create a bull market for the operation. Wehrmann feels they achieved it about two years ago. He says there is a general weakness in

the industry in marketing bulls adequately. The fact that 86 percent of the Wehrmann bulls born in 1989 were sold and used to breed cows in 1990 would seem to indicate the Wehrmann cattle are in line with the cattle industry's demands.

Phase three has involved obtaining a considerable market for bulls for both commercial and purebred business. This has taken place in the last four years, as planned. Wehrmann says that about 95 to 100 bulls are sold yearly through private treaty and during the operation's yearly bull sale in March. He says they also have a good market for females by private treaty.

In addition, every year about 300 females are bred, and close to 50 of this number are sold through the production sale in October. "At this point, you would have to say we are the main reservoir for line bred Rito cattle," says Wehrmann.

Other innovative projects have also come into existence during this phase of their building process. In cooperation with Virginia Polytechnic Institute,



Wehrmann Angus was involved in numerous programs during 1990. According to W.E. Beal, reproduction physiologist with the university, programs such as ultrasound of backfat and loineyes on yearling bulls, milking cows to compare milk EPDs and milk yield, pelvic area measurements of all bulls and heifers, experimental estrous synchronization treatments, determination of fetal sex with ultrasonics, and ultrasound monitoring of pregnancy, have provided valuable data for the entire cattle industry.

"We have always had one big plan," McClung says. "Nick and I will spend our lifetimes trying to achieve it. I don't know if we'll ever make it back or not. We feel it is possible to breed a complete animal, one with calving-ease, adequate milk and growth."

Instead of concentrating on breeding the complete animal, he says breeders seem to be putting too much emphasis on

one particular trait in a bloodline, such as maternal, calving ease or growth.

From the beginning, McClung and Wehrmann decided they wanted to put a herd of cattle together based on traits of economic importance, keeping the "real-true cow business" in mind. When they refer to "real-true cow business," they mean people who sell cattle by the pound and not cattle that are a figment of someone's imagination.

"We measure growth in terms of pounds, rather than in terms of inches," McClung says. "We think cattle of a certain size reach puberty and breed a little sooner, breed back a little better, and are a little easier to keep. Of course, we try to keep cattle that fit the box."

An important criterion for Wehrmann Angus calves is rapid early growth, not a long growth curve that produces 2,900-pound bulls and 2,000 pound cows.

"This is not the real world," McClung says. "The packer is looking for 1,150 to 1,250-pound yield grade 2 steers. And that weight of steer that comes to market at 14 months of age is out of a cow that weighs 1,150 to 1,350 pounds. The purebred business is going to have to supply bulls that can sire the kind of cattle the packers demand."

Wehrmann and McClung agree that the future of the cattle industry lies in the hands of the big three packers who dominate the market. The demand for cattle of a certain size to fit the box, with a high degree of cutability will mean moderating frame size and requiring many other changes for breeders.

"We purebred people are always the last to react," says McClung. "We are always behind the commercial people. We should be the leaders, but I'm not sure we are; I think we react to demand rather than set the standards. We all have to remember that basically the reason for the purebred business is to supply seedstock for the commercial people."

