

Successful Private Treaty Bull Sales are Just One Product of:

DIVERSITY

AT STUKEL ANGUS RANCH

Story & photos by Troy Smith

Stukel Angus Ranch headquarters is perched high on a hill overlooking the Missouri River. From there, you can look to the east and spot Red Rock. That age-old navigational landmark was noted in the journals kept by explorers Lewis and Clark as they made their way through South Dakota in 1805. The intrepid explorers must have marveled at the diversity of the landscape.

The diversity remains today and the Stukel family has capitalized on that attribute to build their successful ranching and farming operation near Lucas, S.D. Crop production enhances the cattle enterprises, including a commercial Angus cow herd, but also a purebred herd from which more than 100 registered bulls are marketed annually. Considering that volume number, it's interesting to note that all Stukel bulls sell by private treaty.

Ranch ramrod, Doug Stukel, manages the cattle, including an extensive artificial insemination (AI) program, recordkeeping and sales. Doug says his father, Ray, is semi-retired, but the senior Stukel's wintertime trips down south don't hinder his crop management chores. But Ray doesn't fly south at the first hint of winter. When fall arrives, he dons another hat. . . that of hunting guide and outfitter.

Hosting hundreds of



hunters each fall is an important family enterprise too. According to Doug, the hunting business complements and supplements their agricultural endeavors, including the buffalo. But that comes later in their story,

"My dad grew up right here

in Gregory County, and came to work on this ranch in 1957," says Stukel. "He went to work for Alan Kime, the owner, but eventually worked into a partnership deal. They bought their first registered Angus cattle in 1960 when they partnered on a set of

Despite his preference for private treaty marketing, Doug Stukel prepares a bull catalog similar to those used for auction sales. The catalog includes an easy-to-read summary of performance data that is popular among customers.

Eileenmere- and Bandolier-bred, yearling heifers. Dad bought a share of the Alvis of Wye bull, in 1965; the same year he started breeding cows artificially. The registered cows have been bred AI every year since then."

By 1970 Ray Stukel owned all of the cattle and began the process of buying the ranch itself. From its original 6,000 acres the ranch has grown to encompass 10,000 acres of rangeland located in the river breaks. About 20 miles to the south, where the terrain is more gently rolling, lies some 2,500 acres of cropland, most of which is rented. Crops include corn, wheat, soybeans and sunflowers.

"Also, we raise grass and alfalfa hay, plus sorghum for silage," Stukel adds. "Sorghum is our silage crop because it yields more tonnage on this clay soil."

Stukel's primary responsibility is the cattle. The ranch presently runs almost 500 registered cows, plus a commercial herd numbering 200 head. The average weight of a Stukel cow, registered or commercial, is 1,200 to 1,250 pounds. That's the size that Stukel considers moderate and optimum.

"It's easy to breed for the maximum, but harder to breed for optimum production," says Stukel. "Using superior sires through artificial insemination offers an edge. We use primarily proven sires that exhibit conformation and a balance between growth and maternal traits. We've tried to avoid the extremes and wouldn't even consider one (sire) measuring much over 62 inches. For hip height, 57 to 62 inches is tall enough."

All yearling heifers, registered and commercial, are bred artificially and that's no small task since Stukel saves at least 80 percent of his heifer



calves. The bred heifer market has been good for the past several years and shows no signs of a turn-around.

"We haven't been able to keep up with the demand for bred commercial heifers. This year, we sent 140 head to Alabama and New Mexico," Stukel explains. "The buyers that come looking say it's hard to find any good, moderately sized females available in any numbers."

Registered cows that are three years old and older are bred AI, but like the commercial cows, registered two-year-olds receive natural service. It's a method of testing some of their own home-raised bulls on young females that represent fresh Stukel genetics. The bulls see a season of natural service, as yearlings, before Stukel decides which will make the cut as new AI sires or natural service sires on the commercial cows.

While Stukel does raise bulls for his own use, annual private treaty sales include 125 to 140 head. The majority are sold as yearlings, but this cattleman always plans to offer a few two-year-olds for the customers that won't buy younger bulls. Stukel prefers to sell privately and has developed a marketing plan that includes a feature more

common among breeders that hold auction sales. That feature is the Stukel bull catalog.

"I'm not long on hype, but I am strong on data," Stukel says. "We include pedigrees in our catalog, but the buyers really like to use the performance summary located in the front of the book. That summary includes birthweights, weaning weights, yearling weights and in-herd ratios. Also included are EPD (expected progeny difference) values. Most of the customers questions are answered within the contents of the catalog."

Stukel maintains a list of past and potential customers that receive a copy of the catalog, which also includes notice of the date when the bulls will be available. By that date, the bulls will be sorted into four pens for viewing. Factors affecting the sort include conformation and performance. Birthweight is important enough to Stukel's customers that one pen will feature only low birthweight bulls.

When the sort is complete, the bulls will be penned according to what Stukel calls his "good, better, best" system. Accordingly, each pen will be assigned a price range. This breeder hopes to continue

The Stukel herd includes 500 registered Angus females and 200 commercial cows. In striving for optimum production, a medium-sized cow is preferred, with a mature weight ranging from 1,200 to 1,250 pounds.

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refining his bull sorting technique and eventually sort into even more pens. It's just part of his goal to provide for customer convenience.

"Most of our customers consider this a convenient way to buy bulls. Most take a look at the catalog and then call ahead to tell me they're coming and when. Once they're here, I spend about 15 minutes for orientation, to review the catalog and explain how the bulls are sorted and priced. Then, the customer spends a half-hour to an hour looking at bulls and making his choices," Stukel explains.

Some breeders favor a one-day auction because they don't want to be tied to the place every day just in case a bull buyer stops. Stukel admits that you can't spend all day, every day, standing around the bull pens trying to sell bulls. And he too has a customer or two that can spend all day looking and still be undecided. But Stukel says most of his customers don't want him to hold their hands while they try to make up their minds. Most come with definite ideas about what kind of bulls they want, and how much they can afford to spend.

"I'm well satisfied with the private treaty method," Stukel adds. During 1991, we sold 125 yearling bulls ranging from \$1,400 to \$2,500. We have a high percentage of repeat customers who like the convenience. And they know we won't sell them a poor bull. We guarantee the bulls and deliver most ourselves. The time we do spend with our customers helps us know their operations and learn what they are looking for. We're happy with this system and more importantly, the customers are."

Bulls that don't make the final cut go into the feedyard and are finished for slaughter. Steer calves, however, are backgrounded and sold as feeder cattle. With breeding bulls, bred heifers, fed bulls and feeder cattle to sell, the Stukels have numerous marketing opportunities.

Even though his father is semi-retired, Stukel turns to Bay for frequent advice regarding the cattle operation. But Bay's real interest, during recent years, is the farming operation. Bay makes nearly all of the decisions regarding crop production. Stukel and the two hired men follow his plans which allow for producing all the feed the cattle require plus the cash crops. In addition to the corn, wheat and sunflowers, enough hay is grown to have extra to sell.

Hunting for a Profit

Another consideration associated with Stukel farming practices is their hunting business. From the 3,000 acres farmed by Stukels, up to 2,000 pheasants may be harvested in a good year. Much of the rented farm ground is owned by Bay's two brothers and they are involved in the hunting enterprise, which includes raising game birds to supplement the wild population. A complete hunter outfitting and guide service is provided. Hunters need only to bring their clothing and their shotguns.

Ray spends as many as 75 days each fall guiding pheasant and grouse hunters. The hunters come from every state in the union and arrive in groups of four to 20. The Stukels' hunting lodge sleeps up to 20 people and features a sport shop. Food is provided and regularly scheduled game feeds are a popular attraction. The hunting service is no small thing and has developed into one of the most popular in South Dakota. It's an important part of Stukels' overall operation.

"We've got a little cabin on the river that some hunters use," says Stukel. "We have a few come looking for turkeys or geese and in recent years, we've hosted a few hunters looking for trophy mule deer, but that's on a much smaller scale. And now we host a very limited number of bison hunts."

Yes, bison. Stukel Angus Ranch is home for a small herd of bison. A few bulls are harvested on guided hunts and a few animals are slaughtered and sold on the rail. It's a niche market that Doug finds interesting and promising.

Team Players

There is no shortage of ambition in the Stukel family. In addition to helping with the ranch's computerized records, Stukel's wife, Sandy works three days each week as a guidance counselor for the nearby Gregory school system. Ray's wife, Melba, lends a hand with tax records. Stukel says both are important

members of the team, as is his foreman, Steve Opp.

"Some days it seems pretty hectic around here," Stukel says with a grin.

"Sometimes it seems we're all headed in a different direction, but we all come together again. Even though our operation is pretty diverse, each phase is carefully thought out. We approach the other enterprises much like we have approached our Angus business. We just don't try to make changes too fast, but we keep changing a little all the time."