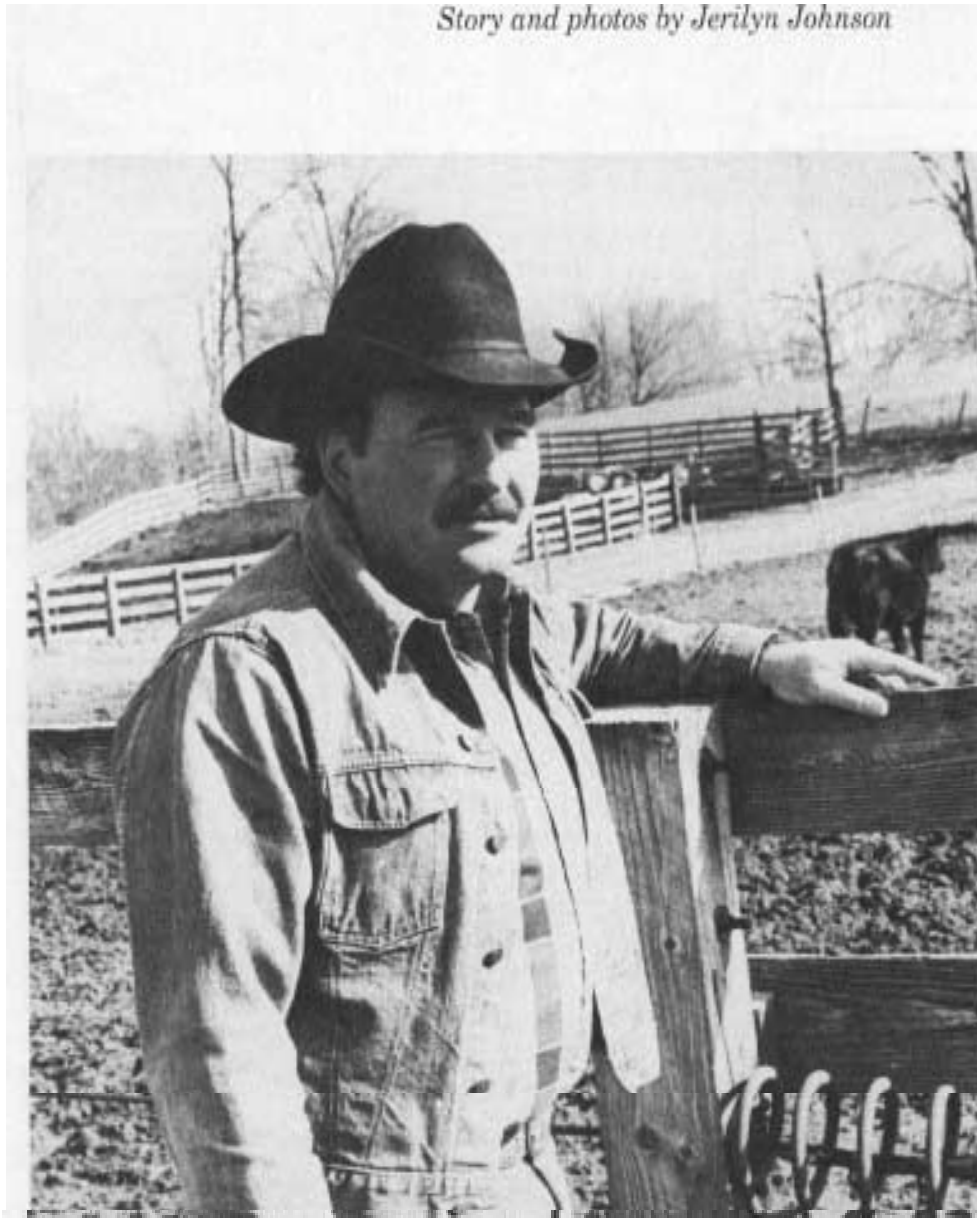


Angus Helps Build Quality and Consistency

Story and photos by Jerilyn Johnson



Mike Kasten is overseeing a new management plan and direction for his commercial cow-calf operation. Angus breeding, a fall-calving program and target marketing are integral parts of the plan.

Mike Kasten has spent 18 years developing a commercial beef operation on his farm in southeast Missouri. During the early years he concentrated on learning the best production practices, tried a variety of crossbreeding programs and labored hard to make his operation successful.

Still, this cattleman was not satisfied with the performance of his cow herd, market prices received for his calves, or his operation's bottom line.

Some eye-opening discoveries about the beef business have given Kasten a new direction and management plan. Fitting right into this plan is a herd of straightbred Angus.

Kasten served as president of the Missouri Cattlemen's Association last year, a role that exposed him to other segments of the beef industry and many new ideas. Foremost in his mind was learning about today's competitive meat business and gaining insight into consumer demand.

"We're really going to have a problem competing on the grocery store shelf, unless we keep beef more price competitive, produce a consistent, quality product and create more convenient products for the consumer," Kasten says. "We haven't done

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any of these things, yet.”

One remedy for this, Kasten believes, is value-based marketing. “I’m doubtful at this point because we have basically three to four segments in the beef industry that are, in essence, competing against each other—whether they want to admit it or not. The truth is, we all make profits off the other guy.”

If and when the day of value-based marketing comes, Kasten predicts the genetic window, the type of cattle needed and carcass specifications will narrow considerably. When that day does arrive, Kasten and other perceptive producers plan to be ready.

Establishing a new program takes time. This young cattleman admits that it’s pretty tough trying to build quality and quantity at the same time. But he is not the type to rush into anything without first reading, researching, analyzing and planning. He feels a total management plan is needed for his farm’s cattle, forage and crop programs to work.

Angus Architect

An integral and time-consuming part of Kasten’s new management plan is building a herd of replacement Angus females. His first action was to put together a set of specifications for this cow herd. They are:

- Uniform type
- High fertility
- Easy fleshing
- Udder quality
- Bred for performance
- Bred for efficiency
- Moderate size

“Angus gives us all these things,” Kasten says. “We’ve

had all kinds of breeds and crossbreds and have had problems with inefficient cows, udder quality and conception. We can’t afford the time to deal with these problems. Angus are the best basic cow we can have.”

Kasten currently runs 430 females, a majority which are crossbred. Both fall and spring calving are practiced, although Kasten is in the process of converting to strictly a fall calving program. This may take five to six years and involves culling most of his older cows, but Kasten feels it will be worth the effort. It also fits right into his management plan.

“Going to fall calving makes economical sense to us,” Kasten says. “We run a 10 percent higher conception rate when we breed for fall calving. Our tall fescue and other cool-season forages are more nutritious in the fall, so we also get heavier weaning weights.”

All cows and first-calf heifers are AI bred to leading Angus sires. Bulls currently being used are Rito 2100, Scotch Cap, Power Fix, VDAR New Trend 315 and Traveler. AI breeding this many animals takes intensive management, extra dedication and a good synchronization program. Kasten checks cows twice a day on horseback during their estrous cycle. A gomer bull is also used to help detect cows in heat. With the assistance of his herdsman, Dennis Sterner, and a couple of cowboys, he gathers the herd once a day during breeding season and moves them to a portable corral and squeeze chute set up in their pasture. The cows are then AI bred twice a day.

“We breed for a 65-day season,” Kasten explains.



Kasten Farm employees Dennis Sterner (right) and Jamie Hurtle weigh a newborn Angus calf. All newborn calves are tagged, tattooed and weighed within 24 hours of birth.

“Approximately 85 to 90 percent of our calves are born in the first 30 days of calving season. This adds to the uniformity of our calf crop.”

Increasing Market Demand

The American Angus Association’s sire summary and its popular Certified Angus Beef Program has given Kasten two more tools to work with in building a sound program that meets beef industry and consumers’ needs.

“The Angus breed has the most highly proven sire summary that commercial cattlemen like me can use,” Kasten says. “And I believe if we can produce a uniform, quality and dependable calf crop, programs such as Certified Angus Beef will increase their demand and

eventually their market price.”

Another good tool has been conducting progeny tests with Sydenstricker Angus Farms, Mexico, Mo. Kasten AI bred a group of his cows to two Sydenstricker Angus bulls. The calves are being raised on Kasten’s farm, then weaned and put in a local farm feedlot. All weaning and yearling weights are recorded on the cattle and carcass data collected after they are fed out and processed.

Kasten says this data will help him evaluate his calves and whether his breeding program is moving in the right direction.

Kasten used to background his steer calves until 12 months of age on his forages and corn silage. In the past few years, with higher than average market prices for

feeder calves, he has marketed his calves after weaning and a short re-conditioning program.

Lately, Kasten has been keeping an eye on the market and feels it could be the right time to take his steers to a heavier weight of 750 to 800 pounds, then market them at a profitable price.

Southeast Missouri's cattle market pricing system is tough for an ambitious cattleman like Kasten. "Our cattle usually get lumped in with cattle from the Southeastern United States. If we lived 150 miles west of here, we'd get 8 to 10 cents more for our cattle."

To remedy this, Kasten is starting to market his calves right off the farm, instead of through local sale barns. More and more cattle buyers today like "farm-fresh" cattle and will usually pay a better price.

Planning for the Future

Down the road, Kasten would like to try retained ownership of his calves where he would merchandise directly to a feedlot or packer. He realizes this type of program involves more risk and requires a large volume of cattle, but thinks it could work with the right timing and perhaps the right producers in a cooperative marketing program.

Another marketing plan that appeals to Kasten is selling in-demand replacement heifers. Once his cow herd is built to the size and type of cattle he feels comfortable with, he plans to begin breeding and selling Angus replacement females.

"New biotechnology such as sexed semen would help a great deal in this kind of marketing program," Kasten says. "I'm looking forward to the day when I can selectively breed for heifers calves and guarantee my customers a quality, uniform set of cattle."

If other cattlemen in the beef industry plan ahead and work as hard as Mike Kasten, that day will be here sooner than we think.

Night-Time Feeding for Day-Time Calving

Rare is the beef producer who enjoys getting up in the middle of the night to check cows ready to calf. First of all, it disturbs your spouse and wakes up the dog. Fumbling around for your calving equipment in the barn is no fun, either. Worst of all, is going out in the cold, pitch-black night to find a black cow who wandered out to the far side of the back 80 to hide her calf in a dark ravine.

So why do it?

Instead, why not find a way to make your cows calve during the day? Not only are you more alert after your morning coffee, you can locate more calves and more easily assist a problem calving in the sunlit hours. Not to mention, if you have to call for veterinary assistance, the vet will be in a much better mood.

Mike Kasten was one producer frustrated with a nighttime routine each calving season. "Nine times out of ten when I'd go out to check a cow, she wasn't ready or wouldn't calve while I was there watching," he says. "On nights when you decide to skip it, you lay in bed worrying about not being there for a difficult birth. It's a no-win situation."

Kasten changed his routine after reading an article on an innovative way to make cows calve during the daylight hours and adapting it to his cow-calf operation. He's now a content, well-rested cowman.

This practice can work for almost any type of cow-calf operation. All it requires is a little preparation, a corral and dry lot and accurate recordkeeping.

Kasten starts with first-calf heifers, which are bred earlier in the season to calf ahead of his mature cows. At the start of calving season, he puts the heifers into a separate lot that adjoins a large corral. Each morning he moves them into the lot without access to feed or pasture.

"Some producers may start

feeling sorry for the cows and give them extra feed during the day," Kasten says. "But it won't work unless they are totally without feed until the 10 p.m. feeding."

During late afternoon chores, feed bunks located in the corral are filled with hay and corn silage. Then around 10 p.m. that night Kasten goes out and opens the corral gate. The cattle come into the corral and move right to the feed bunks.

"A majority of my calves are now born between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., when we can more easily check and work them."

Kasten says cows normally eat for an average of six to eight hours. Their feeding time does depend on the weather, however. If the weather is mild, they may stop eating earlier.

After the cows finish eating, they usually walk around, get comfortable, and then, if the time is right, start calving.

This practice is as easy as it sounds. "It usually just takes me five minutes each night to open the gate and count the cows," Kasten says. "Best of all, it has eliminated calves being born at night. A majority of my calves are now born between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., when we can more easily check and work them."

Once the heifers calve, they are moved to another lot or pasture and given full 24-hour access to feed. Because Kasten synchronizes and AI breeds his first-calf heifers, most calve in a five to seven day period. After a one-week rest period, Kasten repeats this routine with his mature cows until calving season is completed.

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