

Breeding Blueprint Brings Herd Improvement

by James Ritchie

Maynard and Janice Walker know precisely what they want from their Angus and Angus crossbred cattle. And they have drafted a breeding blueprint to get it with their 225-head cow herd on their northeast Oklahoma ranch.

"I want steers that will wean at 600 pounds or more, then go directly to the feedlot and gain about 4 pounds per day," says Maynard. "They need to grade 80 percent Choice, with a high percentage of Yield Grade 1's and 2's."

That's an ambitious set of specifications. Still, they believe it is attainable. "We're doing that with some of our cattle now," Maynard says. "We have fed out our steers and some of our heifers for the past four years, and I like the way our cattle perform all the way 'round. But they can be made better."

The Walkers have been in the commercial cow-calf business near Welch, Okla., for years. Until 1985, most of their market animals sold as feeder calves. But the feeder market didn't always pay a premium for what Maynard and Janice knew were superior cattle.

"There can be a lot of quality difference in what the market calls No. 1 weaning calves," Maynard says. "The feeder calf market doesn't often reward quality. So we started analyzing what the market demands. We want to produce what the packer wants, which should be an accurate reflection of what the consumer will buy."



Maynard Walker

"That's halfblood or higher percentage Angus," says Janice. The crossbred cow herd managed by the Walkers already had a strong Angus influence. In 1986 they bought a high-indexing Angus bull at the Oklahoma Beef Improvement (OBI) All Breeds Production Test Sale at Stillwater.

"We began studying expected progeny differences (EPDs) in bulls, paying more attention to those combinations of traits we needed in our herd," Janice says.

It was at this time that the Walkers decided to upgrade their herd to straightbred Angus. They also started what Maynard calls stacking EPDs. For example, if he selects a herd sire with a +50 yearling weight, his daughters

would be +25, compared with the rest of the cow herd. Then, they add to that by again picking a bull with a +50 or more yearling weight. It helps to use high accuracy bulls, such as Pine Drive Big Sky, Traveler or their sons.

"We've kept a high percentage of our heifers in the herd, but it's still a slow process," Maynard says. "We've had a lot of calls for heifers over the past few years. It's sometimes hard to turn that market down, but we wanted to keep those heifers we've bred up as cows."

Last year the Walkers finished Angus and Angus crossbred steers converted feed to beef at a ratio of 5.9:1. Their cost of gain was approximately 45 cents per pound. The cattle are fed at



Angus-sired calves on the ranch of Maynard Walker, near Welch, Okla., wean at 600 pounds or more and go directly into the Walker wants calves that grade 80 percent Choice with a high percentage of Yield Grades 1 and 2. To get this he says the calves must be half or more Angus and sired by top quality bulls.

nearby Neill Cattle Company, a 12,000-head custom feedyard. The steers averaged a bit short of Maynard's 4-pound ADG goal because of harsh weather. Still, the steers performed well on the rail. A majority of the pen graded Choice, with an average dressing percentage of 64.8 and profit over all costs of \$128.48 per head.

To produce a quality beef product takes good genetics, feeding and management. To stay in the beef business takes some economic and marketing savvy. The Walkers manage their cow herd to calve in two 60-day seasons; one begins Feb. 8, the second begins Sept. 8.

"By **calving in split seasons**, we level out our workload some," Maynard says. "But a big reason we do this is to get more mileage out of top-quality sires. This way, a bull can breed 60 cows or more. That justifies a higher-priced bull." The Walkers shop for herd sire prospects at production-tested sales and by private treaty in a wide radius of their ranch. And they're extra picky. Not every bull looked at has the combination of traits they want. The Walkers want herd sires with no more than a +5 birth weight EPD for adult cows. Their breeding blueprint also specifies +35 weaning weight and +50 yearling weight EPDs, and at least a +8 milk EPD.

"I also look for bulls with big ribeyes and no more than a half inch of backfat," Maynard adds. "There are bulls out there that meet our specifications. For example, we just bought a Scotch Cap son with a big ribeye and low backfat, and within the range on the other EPDs we shoot for." The Walkers are getting in

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sight of their goal of 225 straightbred Angus cows that weigh an average of 1,200 pounds and consistently wean calves that weigh 600 pounds or more.

After weaning, all feedlot-bound calves are vaccinated with Nasalgen for IBR, BVD and PI3 and then put on a preconditioning program. They are given prairie hay and a few pounds of 12 percent protein corn and supplement feed. Maynard works steers up to approximately 5 pounds of dry feed per head per day before sending them to the feedlot. "That gives us the kind of calf we can take directly to the feedlot and finish at 1,050 to 1,100 pounds by the time it's 13 or 14 months old," he says.

Down the road, as the Walkers get more straightbred Angus and registered cows, they will sell more seedstock. "But I always want to know what I've got," Maynard says. "Feeding our own is the best way to get paid what they're worth." This Oklahoma cowman wonders why more cow-calf producers whose cows wean genetically-superior calves aren't keeping title to their cattle all the way to slaughter. "It not only makes sense to do this, it makes more dollars," he says.

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