

# *Performance Testing Sparks a Little* **FRIENDLY COMPETITION** *Between Three West Virginia Breeders*

BY JANET MAYER

**I**n the never-ending quest for beef improvement, many Angus breeders have turned to central bull test stations for assistance. There are 75 test stations in the United States today. And they can be found in almost every region of the country—from the Pacific to the Atlantic. (See "For Your Reference," located in the back of this issue, for more information and location of central bull test stations.)

The methods of testing and ranking bulls at these facilities are as varied as the types of cattle tested and the geographical location of each station. Breeders have learned that putting their bulls on test gives valuable insight into their breeding program as well as providing a market for their bulls. Consigning the top indexing or high gaining bull can also result in added exposure and promotion. Needless to say, competition to breed top performance bulls is strong.

When it comes to competition and added incentive, one need not look further than Earl Groves, Ted Krokus and Charles Halterman. These three West Virginia Angus breeders have been in "friendly competition" their area bull test for many years. Located in the Appalachian Mountains near the town of Petersburg, their farms are located within close proximity of each other.

## **Earl GROVES' OLD HOMESTEAD FARM**

This Angus farm has been entering bulls in local performance tests for about 26 years. Earl is a fourth generation West Virginia farmer and has been in the cattle business all of his life. His great-grandfather began farming in 1869.

The family began breeding Angus cattle in 1952 when Earl's mother purchased the first registered Angus cow from the West Virginia Breeder's Sale held in Petersburg. Later that same year, his father purchased an additional 10 Angus heifers.

Earl, his wife Neva, and their nephew and herdsman, Junior Our, live on the original Homestead Farm, which totals 300 acres. At 78 years of age, Earl still farms full-time even though he went through knee replacement surgery last year and bypass heart surgery six years ago.

Junior, who is a livestock auctioneer in addition to being Earl's herdsman, has been with the family operation since 1988. Although Old Homestead Farm records are not computerized, Junior keeps accurate account of everything, including Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR), which both men consider a necessity for a successful herd.

The two men, along with one full-time employee, care for about 500 head of cattle spread out over several farms. "Actually, the Angus cattle pretty much take care of themselves," Earl says. "I call them old men's cattle because they require so little care.

"Of course, sometimes they require more care, like this past year when we had 10 sets of twins. That was extra work, but only one calf died. I hope we don't have that many again."

Because of the twin calves, the 1994 calving season will remain outstanding in Earl's memory, just as the one in 1983.



Earl Groves (right) and his herdsman, Junior Our, use only performance-tested bulls on their Angus cow herd.

That year, 150 calves were born at the operation with no losses. The West Virginia Cattlemen's Association gave Earl the 1983 Outstanding Purebred Beef Cattle Award.

**Homestead Farm** bulls not sent through the test stations are sold directly to buyers off of the farm.

"I believe we feed cheaper here, and when it comes down to dollars, we make just as much out of those we feed at home. We have a good bull market right here, with about half of our bulls being sold to commercial cow-calf producers."

Bulls not meeting their standards are steered and backgrounded at the farm and sold to feedlots. "I don't want to sell a bull that I don't think will do a breeder any good," Earl says. "You make a dollar that day, you lose it later. You treat a man like you want to be treated, and he will be back."

The heifer market is equally good, with Old Homestead Farm heifers being sold as replacements by private treaty and the remainder to feedlots.

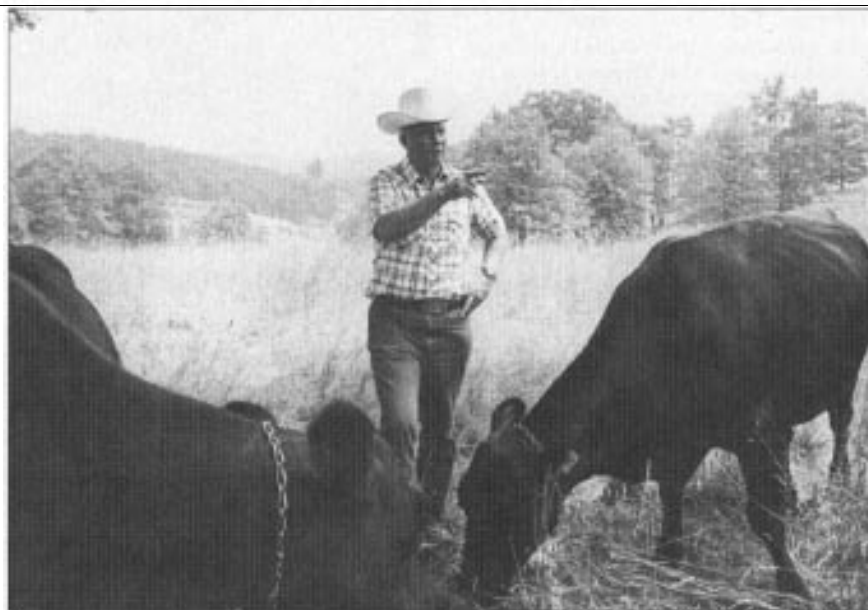
Earl is one of those rare breeders who is satisfied that he has achieved most of his breeding goals. Still, he pays close attention to deciding what bulls to use for their artificial insemination (AI) program. He studies a sire's expected progeny differences (EPDs), but goes more by the pedigree, soundness and composition of a bull, looking for thickness.

Earl credits the Rito line with doing the most for his herd. He says they are better feeders and put on more weight. He introduced the Rito line into his herd by using a son of the Rim bull previously owned by George Halterman Sr. George Sr., now deceased, was owner of The Meadows Farms and was Charles Halterman's father.

"Before I got that Rim son, George's bulls would always top the test at Wardensville," Earl recalls. "My bulls couldn't even touch his in the test. After I got that bull, George was out of the picture, and he never did get back in," he adds with a chuckle.

The Wardensville Bull Test Station in West Virginia is considered by many breeders to be one of the largest in the nation.

"Wardensville, I expect, is the best bull station on this side of the Mississippi. They sell a lot of black bulls and have a good sale," Earl says. "I remember they sent out papers prior to starting the test



*Ted Krokus, owner of Apex Farms, has kept accurate records and collected data on his cow herd for 26 years, resulting in a high EPD accuracy*

station, and I indicated I was in favor. But after it started up, I held off sending bulls for a year, just to see how it would do. The second year I sent some, and I have been sending bulls now for 28 years."

**Over the years** Old Homestead Farm bulls have topped the Wardensville test a respectable number of times, but so far none have topped the other bull tests at Culpeper. "We haven't been going to Culpeper all that long," he says. "Last year we sent a couple of really nice bulls to that test, but the people in charge said it was an endurance test with the bad weather and all. The facility has a mud problem and a wind problem, and the pen of bulls really didn't do that great."

This year Earl has entered 12 bulls at Wardensville, six at Lewisburg, four at the Culpeper senior bull test, and two at the Culpeper junior bull test.

Currently topping the Wardensville test, with 142 Angus on test, is an Old Homestead Farm bull sired by Stonylonesome Husker 6Y. This bull was recording a 6.60 average daily gain (ADG) at press time. "We have the top bull so far," Earl says, "but you know how that goes. It can change real quick, you never know how it will end."

## TED KROKUS' APEX FARMS

Apex Farms has been entering Angus bulls in the Wardensville Bull Test for 24 years. Ted, who is 56 years old, has been in the cattle breeding business for the past 26 years and now has a herd of 130 registered Angus. He also farms 1,600 acres of leased and deeded land.

Ted grew up in an urban area of New York state and currently works as an engineer for the Department of the Navy in Washington, D.C. He and his wife Pat live in the nearby suburb of Oakton, Va.

While growing up, Ted always had a love for rural life. After his marriage to Pat, who is a former resident of Petersburg, he bought a farm near the town. Each weekend and during time off from his job, he commutes to the farm to work with John Halterman, manager of the operation since 1987. John grew up in the area and graduated from West Virginia University with a degree in agriculture.

"I certainly didn't know what I was getting into when I bought this farm," Ted recalls. "My background is in engineering and science and not in agriculture, so I have tried to learn from the people who are most knowledgeable."

He purchased his original group of Angus cattle from Virginia breeder Robert Davenport. This breeder's advice

influenced Ted to develop sound management practices for his farm. Dr. Keith Inskeep of West Virginia University was also helpful in the area of cattle fertility.

**Ted keeps abreast** of new beef industry developments and changes by reading trade publications and gathering information from universities, research stations, beef short courses, technical forums and cattle shows:

Because of his business background, he feels that records are a necessity for any operation, and the farm has participated in the AHIR program since its inception. Computers have been used extensively in this process.

As a result of measuring and collecting data on the cattle over the 26 years of operation, the Apex Farms' herd has higher EPD accuracies than any other herd in West Virginia.

"One determination I made early was if I was going to raise Angus cattle, then I was going to do it properly," Ted says. "I saw the local bull test as not only a good means to market cattle, but more importantly as a good means to evaluate cattle. One year I entered three bulls and had two disqualified. Another year I sent five bulls, and all five were dropped. But rather than being discouraged, I had to ask myself what was I doing wrong in my breeding program. And more importantly what I could do to try to correct it?"

Improvement came over the ensuing years. Apex Farms became the first breeder to send a sire group of 10 or more to Wardensville and have all meet test station requirements. This has been achieved only twice in the history of the test.

Ted explains the qualification process is made by selecting the top two-thirds of the bulls from the entire group entered, then dropping the remaining one-third.

During the past 11 years, Apex Farms has consigned many top gaining bulls as well as sire groups to test stations. This year Apex Farms sent a group of 13 bulls to the Wardensville test station. To date, with 142 Angus on test, an Apex bull sired by RR Traveler 5204 is placing 10th with a 5-pound ADG.

Although AI is the main method of breeding at Apex, clean-up bulls are purchased at bull test stations, making Ted not only a consignor, but a buyer.

"The bulls I buy are selected from the top end of bulls at central stations. Our



*"If you don't use the information you get from your cattle," asks Charles Halterman, "how are you going to improve?"*

four most recent purchases were either the top gaining or second top gaining bulls at their respective tests."

AI bulls and clean-up bulls for the Apex herd are selected for economically important traits such as high fertility, low to moderate birth weight EPDs, moderate milk and growth.

**All heifer calves capable** of making suitable brood cows are registered. Those not added to the herd are sold to local breeders.

The only bulls sold are those consigned to the Wardensville bull test. Other bull calves are castrated and sold as feeder calves to Earl Groves, who has been the main buyer since 1979.

"He sometimes will buy them sight unseen," Ted says. "This may seem irresponsible, but it isn't. Many times we use the same bulls. Actually, we own a number of bulls in partnership and have over the years. Most of the time he will use one of these bulls for his fall calving, and I will use the same bull for spring calving. One of the bulls we own sired the top group of bulls at Wardensville four times, and that is competing against top AI bulls."

#### **CHARLES & GEORGE HALTERMAN'S THE MEADOWS FARMS**

The Haltermans have been participating in the Wardensville Bull

Test since it opened in the late 1960s. George Halterman Sr., father of the two current owners, was a member of a livestock advisory committee for West Virginia University. He was one of a small group of breeders instrumental in initiating the test.

The founder and first owner of the farm was W.C. Halterman, George Sr.'s father. W.C. started a commercial beef operation in the 1930s. Taking over after his death in the early 1940s, George Sr. and his brother, Charles L., co-owned the operation until George's death in 1985.

The operation began breeding Angus cattle in 1969. Prior to that time, The Meadows was strictly a commercial cow-calf operation. As manager of the operation, George Sr. was buying and using registered Angus bulls from many of the early performance tests at Culpeper. These bulls convinced him performance testing was a good thing.

"When plans were started for the West Virginia Bull Test, my father realized he would have to produce some registered stock in order to participate in the program," Charles recalls. "That is when he bought the first Angus females from Virginia breeders Charles Wampler and Fred Carter. This was the basis for our present herd, and we have not bought many females since then."

Both in their 40s, Charles and George

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manage a farm encompassing nearly 6,000 acres spread through Grant and Hardy Counties. The herd, which numbers 750 head of registered Angus, keeps both of the men working full time. There are four other full-time employees who live at two of the other farms.

Since the herd changed over from commercial to purebred in 1986, management has been kept practical by producing cattle under strict commercial conditions. "This is done by raising cattle in a natural environment, by maximizing grass utilization and keeping production expenses at a minimum," Charles explains.

"In the past we always grew corn silage, and some of it would be fed to our young females. We quit growing corn several years ago. I don't think it's cost efficient, and in a cow-calf operation I don't really think it is needed. A good Angus cow ought to be able to make it on pasture in the summer and good grass hay in the winter. We do supplement their diet with a complete mineral with protein."

The herd participates in the AHIR program as well as the West Virginia Bull

Tests, giving it a solid foundation in performance. All records are computerized. The operation sends a pen of about 25 bulls to the bull tests each year. On numerous occasions they have led the rate of gain, topped sales, and gone on to sire progeny that have equaled that performance.

This year, to date, The Meadows Farms has the fifth and seventh ranking bulls at Wardensville. Sired by Meadows Power Play M114, the fifth placing bull has an ADG of 5.29 pounds. The seventh place bull, sired by GT Maximum, is recording a 5.29 pounds AUG. Average ADG for their pen of 24 bulls is an impressive 4.27 pounds.

"Having the top gaining bull on test is nice, but we want to know how our group performs," Charles says. "We don't use the test for just marketing our bulls; we use it for information purposes. We record every little bit of information we receive on our bulls. If you don't use the information you get from your cattle, how are you going to improve?"

The Hallermans try to send at least three bulls from each sire. This gives them added insight into what that sire is

doing for the herd and how his offspring will perform. The Meadows Farms usually markets about 75 bulls each year through the bull test sales and by private treaty. The remainder are steered and sold as club calves or to feedlots.

Until this past year, 75 to 80 heifers were kept as replacements for the herd, with the remainder being sold by private treaty or through heifer sales. The bottom end of the heifers were usually put into the feedlots.

In October 1994, the operation held its first production sale. The sale average was \$1,350. This was the first sale in the history of The Meadows Farms. After many years of breeding high performance cattle, they felt they had a significant offering to make to the Angus public. They plan on making this an annual event.

"We are constantly striving to improve the herd, and above all, convert grass to beef economically," Charles says. "We feel our approach provides a built-in guarantee that our cattle will produce meat under commercial conditions, which is the bottom line in our industry."

