



ANGIE STUMP DENTON PHOTO

*Dwight Houff, manager/owner of Holly Hill Farms, says sire summaries, performance pedigrees and Angus Herd Improvement Records(AHIR) data are important when making breeding decisions.*

# BULLS FOR THE REAL WORLD

Dwight Houff and his staff are breeding bulls that will make money for their new owners.

BY ANGIE STUMP DENTON

*Traveling on I-81 between Harrisonburg and Staunton, Va., you can see some of the most beautiful cattle country imaginable. The lush, fertile Shenandoah Valley is home to Holly Hill Farms, Mt. Sidney, Va.*

*With the production of bulls foremost in their mind, Dwight Houff owner/manager, along with Tom Templeton, sales and operations, and Jimmy Burnette, herdsman, are marketing bulls that will work for their customers.*

*Involved in the purebred industry for more than 30 years, Houff has seen many changes. "This business has gotten so competitive," he says. "A fellow needs to be on the cutting edge, understanding what's going on in the industry. Merchandising and producing cattle is going to be different than it has been in the past."*

For Holly Hill, a well-thought-out bull marketing plan includes consigning bulls to Virginia Beef Cattle Improvement Association (VBCIA)-sponsored bull tests and all-breed bull sales in Staunton and Blackstone.

Templeton says they respect the value of the central bull tests. "They are a way to compare our herd's genetics to others as well as

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## Believing in Angus marketability



**W**hen Dwight Houff was 9 years old his grandpa gave him and his brother two sheep for Christmas. That was Dwight's first experience with agriculture.

A few years later his family bought a milk cow. It was Dwight's responsibility to sell milk to his neighbors in Weyers Cave, Va., on his way to school.

When he was a sophomore in high school his family purchased a 90-acre farm. His mom still lives there today. At that time his dad bought a few horned Hereford cattle and then a Polled Hereford bull.

The Houff family continued to build their Polled Hereford herd in 1979 they hosted their first Polled Hereford production sale.

In 1975, Dwight was hired to manage the Staunton all-breed bull sale for the Virginia Beef Cattle Improvement Association (VBCIA). He continued in the position for 19 years. He credits the experience for influencing his decision to switch to Angus.

"I saw how easy it was to sell Angus and the strong demand there was for the breed," Houff explains.

In 1981 he bought his first Angus. Selling all of their Hereford cattle, today Holly Hill Farms has grown to 180 registered breeding-age Angus females.

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*Above: Today Holly Hill has a split calving season. Houff says it'd be nice to have all fall calves when marketing, even though the cow herd would require more supplemental feed.*

keep our farm name in front of commercial producers," he explains.

Each year Holly Hill Farms consigns 20 bulls to Virginia's three central bull test stations — Culpeper, Red House and Wytheville. The Holly Hill bulls accompany more than 625 bulls that are placed on test each year at the three central test stations.

"Dwight is a strong supporter of better and improved beef cattle," says A.L. Eller, who oversees the VBCIA bull test stations. "He's always consigned good bulls to the test stations."

Before a sale Houff and Templeton do their homework promoting the Holly Hill offering. Eller says the activity they cause at a sale also helps other consignors.

Holly Hill was recognized as the premier breeder for the 1996-97 bull test year for the highest indexing group of bulls in all three of the VBCIA test stations.

At press time, two Holly Hill bulls were leading the Wytheville and the Culpeper junior tests.

**Holly Hill also merchandises** 50 bulls through private treaty.

Because of an increased supply of high-quality bulls, Holly Hill is planning its first bull sale in February 1999. Templeton says they will still continue sending bulls to test stations to collect data and gain industry exposure, which are both reasons why the stations are so valuable to their marketing strategy.

Holly Hill also offers a few females for sale each year. In 1996, Houff, along with four other local Angus breeders started a female production sale, the Performance Alliance Sale. The sale is held the second Saturday in September at the Holly Hill headquarters.

### Service after the sale

A strong marketing program is usually accompanied by customer service. Once you've made a sale, it's important to keep the buyers coming back year after year.

Repeat customers and guaranteed satisfaction are a priority at Holly Hill. The staff maintains a list of buyers and keeps in touch with customers on a regular basis.

Houff files a 3x5 card listing the bull and date of sale for each buyer. This information is also added to a mailing list for future promotional efforts.

Periodically they put together a flyer or other information and mail it to past and potential customers. Keeping the Holly Hill

name in front of customers creates more recognition in the sale ring.

After a buyer has owned a bull for a couple of years Houff mails the buyer a questionnaire. He includes a self-addressed, stamped envelope to make it convenient for the customer. He's had a good response rate.

"Houff's service to his customers makes him stand out among the crowd," explains Eller.

When evaluating the Holly Hill breeding program, Houff wants people to recognize a working set of cows and folks that will stand behind the product they sell.

If a customer has a problem with a Holly Hill animal, Houff and Templeton will do their best to fix the problem. "Let us know first, not last, if you're not satisfied," Templeton says.

Houff adds, "One unhappy buyer can do tremendous damage, ruining all of your previous efforts promoting your herd."

**Franklin Kean** a commercial producer from Louisa, Va., is a strong supporter of the Holly Hill program. A repeat customer, the Kean family has bought six Holly Hill bulls since 1992.

"Holly Hill is a good outfit to deal with," Kean says. "Dwight is as honest and straight as they come."

If time permits, Templeton likes to deliver bulls to Holly Hill's bull customers. "We really appreciated Tom delivering our bull," Kean adds. "He also took the time to look over our cow herd and evaluate our breeding program."

### Performance to sell

The final, but possibly most important, ingredient to merchandising cattle is genetics. A producer must have a quality product to entice prospective buyers.

Detailed performance data is collected on each Holly Hill animal and reported to the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program. With the use of the Angus Herd Management System (AHMS) software program, Houff is able to electronically store and report the data to the American Angus Association.

"The No. 1 reason I want to keep detailed performance information is for our own use here on the farm," Houff explains. "I'm trying to identify the superior producers."

In 1996 five Holly Hill cows earned Pathfinder status.

## Team effort



Each day the Holly Hill crew meets for a staff meeting to plan the day's activities. Some meetings may last five minutes; others, 30 or more, explains Dwight Houff, owner/manager.

Houff says it's important to maintain communication among the staff. "I'm fortunate to have outstanding help on the farm," he adds. "They are all knowledgeable and get along well together."

Tom Templeton joined the staff in 1996 managing the sales and operations. "He's a real asset," Houff says. "Tom really likes to be involved with the farm on a daily basis."

Also helping with the management and breeding decisions is Jimmy Burnette, herdsman. Burnette is the farm's artificial insemination (AI) technician.

Prior to breeding season all three sit down and evaluate the cow production records and determine what bull matings could genetically improve the herd.

"Merchandising and producing bulls is foremost in our minds when we're making selection decisions," Houff says.

*Above: Dwight Houff and Tom Templeton want cows that will do well on forage and that don't need an abundance of concentrated feed. The Holly Hill staff rotates groups of females on their fescue-orientated operation in the Shenandoah Valley.*

**Building consistency** is another herd goal. "We're getting tighter in our selection process, avoiding extremes in the cattle we are producing," Houff says.

Some selection tools used by the Holly Hill team are scrotal expected progeny differences (EPDs), ultrasound data and carcass EPDs.

"We are paying attention to carcass data and carcass EPDs in our selection process, but it's not our only criteria," Houff explains.

When selecting females the Houff and Templeton team scrutinizes udder quality. "If a female has an udder problem we will use her as a recipient in our embryo transfer

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## BULLS FOR THE REAL WORLD cont.



*Holly Hill bull calves are creep-fed, then placed on a silage-based feed test after weaning. Several Holly Hill bulls are also sent to bull test stations. Houff and his staff believe there is a true value to central bull test stations.*

(ET) program. We do not propagate bad udders,” Houff says.

The duo agrees the ideal Holly Hill cow will calve at 2 years of age and then on a yearly basis, and she’ll maintain well on grass. She’s structurally correct, high-volume and moderately framed (5.5-6.5 frame). They want their females to milk enough to wean a 600-plus-pound (lb.) calf and produce steer calves that will finish at 1,200 lb. efficiently in the feedlot. Longevity is another sought after trait.

**To meet the demand** of their bull buyers they use artificial insemination (AI) and ET. They AI more than 60% of the herd to proven bulls.

Houff appreciates knowing what to expect from a bull, but does realize the need to test young sires. To get a true picture of what a young bull can produce he breeds the unproven sire to a cross section of the cow herd.

Using ET they are able to propagate the herd’s superior genetics. Houff says the economics of ET makes it more attractive

today. In 1997, Holly Hill cows were selected and flushed.

### Looking to the future

“People are in the purebred cattle business for all sorts of reasons. We are here for the long haul,” says Houff. “I’ve been at it for more than 35 years and I find it more challenging than ever because we are selecting for so many traits and we have so many tools for making improvements. It’s my aim to have cattle carrying the HHF prefix be the kind that will make money for their new owners. That’s what it’s all about.”

Templeton says they plan to maintain the herd at 200 head, optimizing their stocking rates. Their goal is to continue identifying young females as potential donors to put in their ET program.

Another avenue they hope to investigate in the future is helping their customers merchandise their calves.

“Herds in this part of the country have smaller numbers,” Houff explains. “There is great potential for alliance work helping customers group calves to market.”