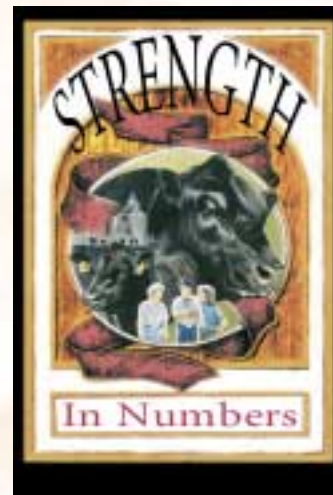




ANGIE STUMP DENTON PHOTOS

8th
in a series



IDENTIFYING SUPERIOR GENETICS

Texas breeders join forces to develop bulls.

BY ANGIE STUMP DENTON

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arketing bulls is something seedstock producers work at year-round. Before you can establish a good marketing program, you must have a good product

with the data to support it. For small- and large-scale breeders alike, achieving success in both is sometimes challenging. The Beef Development and Research Center of Texas (BDRCT) is helping producers achieve both.

After reading an article in the *Angus Journal* about the North Dakota Bull Test

(September 1997, page 524), Texas Angus breeder Robert Bruner was determined to start something similar in Texas. "There was a big need for a bull development program in Texas," Bruner explains, "especially for the Angus breed, because of the number of small-scale breeders in the state."

After a year of research and looking for project partners, the Texas Angus Association (TAA) and the Texas Brangus Breeders Association (TBBA) teamed with Matt Moore, owner and operator of Tom J. Moore Cattle Co., to start BDRCT. The

center is located at the Tom J. Moore Feed Yard near Washington, Texas.

"This program gives small breeders the opportunity to test their bulls against some of the best breeders in the state," says Bruner, who is currently president of the group. "If someone has only 10 to 20 bulls, he might have the Angus breed's next EXT or Traveler, but nobody will know it unless the producer gets the bull out to a place like this and gets him tested."

To start the program TBBA contributed \$20,000, and individual Texas Angus breeders matched the \$20,000 so TAA was an equal partner.

BDRCT is more than a bull test — it's also a development program. "Participating in this program, a guy with one bull gets the same results as the breeder with 100 bulls," says Robert Bruner, BDRCT president. "He will know how his genetics stack up."

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"The program is a great measuring stick for small breeders. For large breeders the private test is a good way to develop bulls and gather performance data. The program is also designed to cater to several other needs by developing bulls for breeder groups [who] are planning a sale. All bulls tested and sold will also have their calves eligible for a buyback program," says Texas Angus breeder Todd Davison.

The center is governed by a six-member board and is currently managed by Craig Hillert. Texas A&M University, College Station, is an important partner to the group.

"A&M's role is to provide technical support — verify accuracy and calculate data collected; provide student manpower, including a student intern; and to act in an advisory role," explains Bill Turner, A&M's San Antonio Livestock Exposition chair professor in the beef cattle section. Turner also serves on the BDRCT board in an advisory role.

"It's phenomenal that a group of purebred breeders has joined together to market bulls of [multiple] breeds," Turner says. "There is a need for better communication and identification within the commercial beef industry. This program is a direct effort to prove that as seedstock producers they're interested in developing the type of bulls the commercial cattleman is demanding."

■ Nomination process

Producers can nominate bulls of any breed, but if they are TAA or TBBA

members, they get a reduced nomination fee. As other Texas breed associations join the group, their members also will get discounted rates. Other breed groups who have indicated interest in joining are Charolais, Gelbvieh, Simmental, Simbrah and Santa Gertrudis.

Bulls are required to have a registration certificate (may be applied for) and some type of permanent identification, such as a legible tattoo or brand. Bulls typically go on test at 9-13 months of age, coming off test at 1-1½ years of age. The center has three scheduled tests per year. It also conducts custom tests for breeders who want to test 50 or more bulls in one pen.

Todd Davison of TD Cattle Co., Hearne,

Texas, has participated in the individual herd-testing program, sending three groups of bulls to the center. "This program has helped breeders evaluate their breeding and management program and the genetics in their herds. It also takes away the need to have a development facility on your ranch," he says.

Response to BDRCT has been outstanding. Bruner says that during the first year the board's goal was to develop 400-500 bulls. They developed 1,409. To date 2,441 bulls have been tested, including 1,221 Angus.

Texas Angus breeder Alford Echols of Cooper says that when he heard about the formation of BDRCT he wanted to be on the ground floor of what he saw as a great opportunity for Angus breeders in Texas.

Echols has sent 18 bulls through the program. "It has been nice seeing how the genetics in my herd have compared to those of other breeders in the state," he says. "Testing at BDRCT has been an eye-opener; my top choices have not always been my top performers. In a few years I will be able to see if I am making the progress I'm striving for."

■ Costs

Davison says one of the reasons he chose to feed his groups of bulls at BDRCT is because the center's services are cost competitive.

The nomination fee is \$100/head for members of TAA and TBA or \$150 for other producers.

Feed cost is calculated individually based on percent body weight consumption. Producers are also charged for processing, ultrasounding and veterinary fees, including the initial cost of an ear tag, revaccination and individual treatment of animals.

Craig Hillert, BDRCT manager, says producers can expect an average cost of \$400-\$500 if they take the bulls home right off test. If the bulls are kept at the center during the summer (June to November), producers can expect a \$1.50/day charge.

BDRCT objectives

- Locate and recognize potentially superior breeding bulls by demonstrating and evaluating postweaning growth and development on silage-based rations.
- Provide purebred operations of all sizes with an economically sound alternative to growing and developing young bulls at home and, at the same time, assist in the identification and improvement of economically important traits.
- Establish a continuous supply of performance-tested bulls, for both commercial and purebred breeders, that will sire cattle desired by the market for the future.

■ Procedures

The program is the closest to an all-forage test in Texas. The bulls are kept in large traps and are fed a high-roughage ration consisting of silage. Bruner says after the test the bulls are in good shape and are physically ready to go out and breed cows.

The center has a minimum 21-day warm-up period subsequent to receiving cattle and prior to weigh-in for the official test. The length of the test is approximately 112 days for all breeds. When possible, the staff groups bulls by age to minimize differences within pens.

A&M makes sure data is correctly collected, oversees adjustment procedure, indexes the bulls and provides information

to producers. Turner makes sure the procedures comply with Beef Industry Federation (BIF) guidelines and standardized procedures.

Data collected includes weights at the midpoint and end of the test, average daily gain (ADG), and weight per day of age (WDA). Off-test data include ADG and WDA ratios, adjusted yearling weight, hip height, and scrotal circumference. Ultrasound data — ribeye area, fat thickness and percent intramuscular fat — are collected on all bulls. Data on Angus bulls are collected and reported according to guidelines of the American Angus Association's Centralized Ultrasound Processing (AAACUP) program.

Summary reports on individual bulls are mailed to breeders after mid- and off-test weights are taken.

"How we sort the cattle [for the sale] is completely objective unless a physical defect is found," says Billy Cook, who was manager of the center from its beginning until August 1999 and is currently a livestock specialist with the Noble Foundation in Ardmore, Okla. He remains an advisor to the BRDCT board. The bulls are ranked with a breed-specific index based on adjusted yearling weight ratio, ADG ratio, actual scrotal circumference ratio and adjusted ribeye area ratio.

■ Marketing

Producers can choose to take their bulls home to market them private treaty or in their farm's production sale, or the bulls can sell in one of the BDRCT-sponsored sales. The group hosts two sales a year, one in November and one in February. Ranked by the BDRCT index, the top 70% of each breed is eligible to sell.

If the bulls stay at the test station, they will be maintained on a development ration until sale day. The spring-tested bulls are turned on pasture and fed to gain 2 pounds (lb./)day until the November sale.

■ Educational process

"This program is beneficial to Angus breeders because it allows them to identify the genetics within their herd," says Hillert. "The data breeders receive can be used as a tool in making breeding and management decisions, in addition to marketing their livestock. This knowledge is a tremendous asset to the breeders who are continuously striving to improve the quality of beef they produce."

When producers receive test data, a brief description of the data collected is included with the reports. Hillert and his student intern will sit down and explain the data to producers or discuss the results over the phone if the producer has any questions.

"The educational process is worth so much," Bruner adds. "There are disappointments; we've had folks completely change their genetics after testing here."

Cook says participants have learned the importance of a good health program and preconditioning bulls before delivering them to the center.

The group has developed a recommended preconditioning program.

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Organizing and planning the center took a lot of time and effort. Three individuals who were instrumental in starting the Beef Development and Research Center of Texas are Matt Moore, owner-operator of Tom J. Moore Feed Yard; Billy Cook, original manager of the center and current advisor; and Robert Bruner, BDRCT president.



After the bulls come off test, producers can take them home, or they can leave the bulls at the center on a development ration until the sale. Spring-tested bulls are turned on pasture and fed to gain 2 lb./day until the sale.

At weaning producers are encouraged by BDRCT to feed a mixed-grain ration (0.75%-1% body weight) and free-choice hay. It is recommended that the calves be weaned 45 days prior to delivery (not less than 30 days).

"If producers don't precondition their bulls, they can have a train wreck," Cook says. "The No. 1 detriment to success in the test is to have a bull get sick. Once a bull gets sick, he can't catch up."

■ **Future**

Bruner says a goal of TAA is to help regional Angus groups maintain their regional bull sales yet still test the bulls at BDRCT, so the bulls are all developed the same way and have performance data to accompany them. The center can manage the bulls until sale day.

"Sending bulls to BDRCT ensures regional associations will have a uniform set of bulls with reliable, usable data," Bruner says.

Another program started to complement

the center is a buyback program for buyers of BDRCT-tested bulls.

"What we're trying to do is form relationships with these breeders," explains Moore. "Tom J. Moore Cattle Co. will buy back calves out of BDRCT-tested sires, paying a premium for the calves that meet their specifications."

Since the development of BDRCT, the Moore family has converted their feedyard into a backgrounding facility. The calves are preconditioned at Moore's facility before going to a feedlot. Throughout the process, data are collected and shared down the chain, including feedlot performance and carcass data.

"The buyback program is a win-win

situation for all involved," Moore adds. We get a healthy calf with known genetics, the bull buyers have a marketing alternative for their calves, and seedstock producers will hopefully receive a premium for the genetics they are producing.

This winter 3,000 calves sired by BDRCT-tested and -developed bulls were being preconditioned in Moore's lots.

Turner says the success of BDRCT hinges on seedstock producers' realizing a value from participating in the program and seeing it as a way to market their superior bulls, as well as on Moore's being successful in aiding producers who buy BDRCT-tested bulls.

For more information about BDRCT, contact Craig Hillert, manager, at (409) 878-2749, e-mail bdrct@aol.com or check out the program's Web site at www.bdrct.com.

BDRCT index values

- Adjusted yearling weight ratio = 45%
- ADG ratio = 35%
- Actual scrotal circumference ratio = 10%
- Adjusted ribeye area ratio = 10%

