

A voice in the wilderness

by Steve Suther, director of industry information

You might call him “the conscience of the breed.” Some Angus seedstock producers have used that title to describe the squire of Octoraro Angus Farm, Sam Wylie. If the name fits, it is because of the path he has traveled, from being the first National Junior Angus Showmanship champion in 1967 to trimming dairy hooves to holistic resource management (HRM) and profitable Angus production.

The Breezewood, Pa., seedstock producer is devoted to the maternal side of the breed. It pains him to see the sire summary overflowing, in his opinion, with bulls that promote either growth and frame or carcass traits while giving maternal traits the short end of the stick.

Knowing the role shows have played in the fads that tempted the breed into extremes, he now says, “While my roots are deep in the segment of fitting and showing and blue-ribbon-chasing, I’m not very proud of that. Over the years I’ve had to do a lot of adjusting to try to find my niche and make a living with Angus cattle. . . . I had to come full circle.”

Wylie toured Western ranches in 1969, looking for practical ideas to take back East. He got his own cattle and resolved to manage them as a performance herd rather than a show herd.

Early influences by Jan Bonsma and Kearney Redmen led Wylie to pursue the theory that form follows function. He had been using artificial insemination (AI) during the 1970s for some time when the frame craze hit, but those mentors kept him from that error, he says.

Yet another one loomed. “Somewhere along the line I became a purist, worrying more about pedigree than anything else,” he confesses. “When the sire summary came out, we were introduced to the EPD (expected progeny difference) system, which de-emphasized pedigree. I wore out more sire summaries than most people then.”

Ironically, it seems to him now, Wylie helped support his struggling Angus farm by custom hoof trimming for confinement dairies in the area. The cows flourished on the rations required to maximize milk production and needed regular pedicures to stay sound. Neither dairy producers nor Angus producers of that day could see they were promoting genetic antagonisms, Wylie says.

He admits he gave in to some of the temptations for a short while, but in the

1980s providence intervened.

Development pressure forced him to relocate 150 miles west of the Octoraro River valley where he began, out to the highlands of south-central Pennsylvania.

“Now I spend less time with the sire summary than just about any other Angus breeder,” he says. The new farm coincided with his conversion to the HRM school of thought. “I’m not a tree hugger or a fanatic, but I’ve learned that you have to work with nature, never against.”

He set out to structure his place as a grass farm that would never be tilled and allowed to erode into Chesapeake Bay. Wylie knew that the Angus cow still fit perfectly, having experimented only a little with the occasions of sin presented by frame and growth EPDs.

“I just couldn’t raise daughters then that were as good as their mommas were,” he says. “Maternal, to me, means much more than just milk, which in excessive form can be a detriment on strictly forage-based inputs. Factors more difficult to measure, such as fleshing ease, udder attachment and teat size, body capacity, fertility and calving interval all influence the ability of cows to stick with you for the long haul.”

Wylie settled on “the old reliable work-and-wear lines that had never been outcrossed for frame and growth.” Sires several decades old, mostly Wye-influenced Shoshone bloodlines and early Rito bulls, continue to be used in a planned line-breeding program. He has adapted these lines to the grass farm model, concentrating on forage efficiency, longevity and low-cost production.

Wylie found a life’s partner in wife Sherrill, who suggested an organized program of sharing the herd genetics (80-100 cows) with others. This is a region where commercial bull customers were few, even if it would pay to sell forage-reared 2-year-olds. The mainstay would be proven, forage-adapted Angus cows. The third of these sales, one every other year, of 4-year-old cows took place last fall.

The cows are well-proven by 4 years of age, because they

receive no grain or other supplement as heifers and are chosen solely by their ability to become bred on a June pasture diet to calve as 2-year-olds. Calving, in synch with nature, is in April and May.

“We do a lot of line-breeding, and try to identify bulls from herds with similar values and goals as ours, but that is becoming difficult to do,” Wylie notes.

He samples the “good performance bulls — not the fly-high-and-die type, but the kind that can make cows.” He also samples a few Octoraro bulls before selling them as 2-year-olds. “Sometimes we’ll find that although an outside sire’s daughters are not as good as their mommas, his son’s daughters regain that adaptability.”

The Octoraro goal is one of profit per acre, emphasizing production traits, not maximum production. To preserve traditional Angus reproductive efficiencies, he’s trying sexed embryo transfer (ET), flushing a pair of Pathfinder “Granny” cows that possess excellent udders and body capacity to sires like Viking GD 60, Emulation 31, Rito FO203, and Traveler 6807. Another bull being sampled is Fabron of Wye, a sire from days of yore. “Daughters of that old bull lasted 16-18 years, and that’s a key to low-cost production,” Wylie points out.

If Wylie has a favorite miracle fantasy, it’s that he can develop a line of females “so prepotent that they can take the service of the most extreme growth-trait sire and still produce a daughter that works here.” He lacks faith that such things can happen: Maternal is much more delicate than those dominant growth traits.

Still, he says it’s not too late for the Angus breed in general to own up to misdirection and come back to the solid middle. “The breed would be better off if the top EPD bulls for growth and frame, as well as the top carcass bulls, were only used as terminal sires,” he maintains. Once maternal efficiency and longevity are lost, they are difficult to retrieve.

Like a voice in the wilderness, Wylie cries out: “Let’s all pay attention to where we’re headed.”

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