

# Angus Stakes

by Shauna Rose Hermel, editor



## If Ma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy

She can make ranching a joy or pure hell. That mama cow defines your workload (and, subsequently, your customers') for the coming year.

She can make it easy on you — calving unassisted, claiming and nurturing her calf, milking well, breeding back, and gaining condition in your environment. Or she can make it infuriatingly difficult — chasing you over the fence while you try to pull a calf she won't claim without her nose in a feed bucket, half starving a calf that gets more attention from you than her, and losing time in your breeding schedule.

The Angus cow is known for her mothering ability and freedom from problems inherent in other breeds. She is truly the foundation of the breed.

In fall 1999 we asked *Angus Beef Bulletin* subscribers what best described the genetic base of their herds. Of the 6,244 respondents, 32% said straightbred Angus, 33% said Angus-British crosses, and 28% said Angus-Continental crosses. Commercial cattlemen rely on the Angus mama cow as much as we do.

Her ability to thrive and to reproduce in a multitude of environments plays a central role in beef profitability, not to mention a cowboy's mental health.

**We can argue as to** her ideal frame size, mature weight and mature height, as well as to how her face hairs should swirl and what expected progeny differences (EPDs) she should have. But the fact of the matter is that she's got to conceive for her first calf early in life. She has to have a live calf that can perform well. And she has to breed back to calve the next year on time, year after year after year.

Those are the traits rewarded by the Pathfinder program initiated by the American Angus Association in 1978. The *2001 Angus Pathfinder Report* begins on page 225. It lists cows qualifying for Pathfinder status this year.

The performance EPDs of these herd matrons represent a wide variation in birth weight, weaning weight, maternal and yearling weight EPDs. What that tells me is

that we can select for the performance criteria that we need without giving up maternal ability.

**Complicating matters somewhat** are production practices that don't allow maternal ability to express itself. Embryo transfer (ET), for example. How can you tell if the dam of your ET calf is a good mother if you purchased the calf in a recipient cow? How much value is there in making cows reach Pathfinder status before placing them in an ET program? After all, if she can't reach Pathfinder, is she really worth it?

In the purebred business, a cow may be able to raise a calf good enough to be marketed at a price that would pay her keep for several years. But that value is an illusion.

We're raising seedstock for a commercial industry. They may be worth more because they're Angus and carry a greater potential for *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) acceptance, but one calf will not pay a cow's way. Ideally, cows need to produce six to seven consecutive calves during their lifetime. Any fewer diminishes their income-producing capacity.

**The purebred hog industry** went too fast to the terminal traits. Now the term *maternal sow* is almost an oxymoron. Granted, by weaning at 10 days of age in controlled environments, you remove most of the need for mothering and milking ability.

But I don't believe that's a forward-thinking mentality for the hog industry, and it is an impractical mindset for cattlemen.

We should select for terminal traits among those cows that can thrive and reproduce in our commercial customers' cow herds. Steady progress in that direction will improve the breed and ensure that we don't create problems for ourselves along the way.

Whether you're calving 400 cows this spring or 20 while working another full-time job, you don't have time for problems. You need cows that want to be mamas, that work with you instead of against you and that can produce calves that will earn you a profit.

Truly, if Ma ain't happy, there ain't nobody going to be happy.

## Careful with terminology

It amazes me that the ag media can be so careful in substituting *harvest* for *slaughter*, but it is so quick to use the label *mad cow disease* when referring to bovine spongiform encephalopathy. Stop it.

Use the acronym, BSE, if the full name is too much of a mouthful, but don't use a misguided term used to incite fear among consumers. I'd expect *Sixty Minutes* and *20/20* to use such tactics as marketing tools, but we should be above that.

Hold your information sources to a higher standard. You need to be informed, not worked into a frenzy.

If you're looking for information about BSE, Susan Rhode provides a nice overview in her PACE column. She provides several Web addresses that you can use as information sources. We will have a feature ready for the May issue. Look for a preview at [www.angusjournal.com](http://www.angusjournal.com).

## June issue

We will publish a June issue of the *Angus Journal* this year. The early copy deadline (which gets a discount) is April 20, while the regular deadline is April 25.

With our new schedule, we won't be putting out the advertising sales effort for a July "Herd Reference Edition" as we have in the past. The July issue will carry our "Feeding Options" insert, which will focus on a quality vs. commodity mindset.

## Compliment

Circulation Coordinator LaVera Spire relayed a wonderful compliment from a Nebraska cattleman. He told her the *Angus Beef Bulletin* improved with each issue and that he liked it so well that he cancelled his subscription to a national general farm publication and quit reading one of the national nonassociation beef publications (names withheld to protect the innocent).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shauna".

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