

Mama First

Angus breeders are crowning the Angus cow ‘Maternal Queen’ with aid of voluntary whole-herd reporting system.

Story & photos by Ali Luety, American Angus Association



Revered as the “mother breed,” the Angus cow is known for her calving ease, high weaning weight, maternal milk and fertility, to name a few. Recently, however, selecting for maternal merit has sometimes been overshadowed by efforts to improve carcass and growth traits within the Angus breed. People have accused some lines of Angus cattle, even the entire breed, of losing its maternal focus.

Today, Angus breeders across the nation are diligently working to reverse that notion.

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Pulling up to Dalebanks Angus outside of Eureka, Kan., it's evident the operation has a long-standing commitment to the Angus breed. A faded ranch sign with a short, stocky Angus bull of years past hangs on the barn, a testament to how far the breed has come in recent decades. Matt Perrier and his dad, Tom Perrier, manage the operation. For them, raising Angus cattle is a family tradition.

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"Almost everything on the ranch traces back to between 1908 and 1920," Tom shares.

With decades of proven genetics, the Perriers still have a keen focus on improving their herd. Dalebanks Angus maintains very strict fertility standards to place pressure on their cow herd for efficient reproduction.

"There is this stereotype that the Angus cow is no longer the maternal queen that she used to be. I don't believe that to be true," Matt says.

The Perriers use MaternalPlus® to characterize fertility and reproductive efficiency and effectively serve as a selection tool.

"The reason that motivated us to be on [MaternalPlus] is quite simple. Reproductive efficiency is the driver of profitability in any cow-calf operation, and MaternalPlus helps us quantify these traits," Matt explains. "Whether it's the best set of registered cows in the world or commercial cows, fertility is going to be the number one profit driver. So, when we can characterize that, we can add value to the Angus cow."

No cow left behind

Whole-herd reporting is something the Perriers support wholeheartedly. MaternalPlus was designed as a voluntary whole-herd reporting system, meaning no cow slips through the cracks. Without the big picture that MaternalPlus gives ranchers, it's challenging to find areas for improved cow efficiency.

"Everybody talks about efficiency," Matt says, adding, "the true measure of efficiency is, in our case, the number of quality bulls and replacement females produced divided by our total cow herd. We need to find out how efficient we are with the inventory that we have here."

As conversations about sustainable agriculture and land stewardship continue, the Angus breed needs to be able to tell a good story.

"We've got to get as many pounds of beef out of cows that are out here on the nation's rangelands as we can. That's sustainability, that's efficiency, and that's why we've got to look at it from a whole-herd standpoint."

In addition, a whole-herd approach gives the Association information on every cow and her calf's

performance, translating to better expected progeny difference (EPD) predictions, improved heifer pregnancy (HP) EPD prediction, and a better understanding of HP EPD genetic variation. Accurate HP EPDs are essential when selecting for fertility since

they determine the probability of a sire's daughters getting pregnant as first-calf heifers.

Patience is a virtue

The Perriers are the first to admit that



Pulling up to Dalebanks Angus outside of Eureka, Kan., it's evident the operation has a long-standing commitment to the Angus breed. Matt Perrier (left) and his dad, Tom Perrier, manage the operation.

MaternalPlus changed their reporting structure. The program requires logging a bit more time entering data and a sharp attention to detail. Although cleaning up record books might seem daunting, it can be eye-opening, as well.

“Some of that cleaning up we need to do, and realize it also jogs us a little bit. Maybe we’re culling more cows than we really thought we were,” says Tom, who acknowledged that as he was preparing to enroll in MaternalPlus, he found a handful of cows still on the inventory that hadn’t been at Dalebanks Angus for a decade.

Once a rancher makes the leap to join MaternalPlus, the program provides several tools to add value to any operation.

In addition to increased prediction accuracy of HP EPDs, producers enrolled in the program receive calving ease, birth weight and weaning weight EPDs at weaning weight processing time.

“You also get some pretty cool MaternalPlus reports just for users. One of those reports that I really enjoy is the genetic trend report,” says Kelli Retallick, genetic service director at the American Angus Association. “That’s a report where you can pick any trait we offer and benchmark your herd against the entire Angus population. How great of a marketing tool would that be if you are excelling beyond the breed genetic trend?”

Further reports include weaning weight sire

summaries, calf death loss, body condition score (BCS) summaries and dam disposal reports.



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The long-term benefits have the potential to greatly advance the entire Angus breed.

Expanded collection of reproductive trait data could help the Association to create a more sophisticated maternal selection tool, such as a cow longevity EPD.

“We all love the Angus cow, and we think she can do a really great job out there in the industry, so why not collect the data and let’s prove that

out and tell our commercial customers how long she’s predicted to stay in the herd,” Retallick says.

The American Angus Association is the only major breed association that does not have a mandatory or semi-mandatory whole-herd reporting structure. No cow longevity or stayability prediction tool for Angus cattle exists.

While Association members are applauded and committed to providing performance records

on individual progeny, reproductive data are lacking. In order for the Angus cow to remain the industry leader, reproductive data must be collected and quantified to aid in selecting the most efficient and reproductively sound individuals possible.

“We’ve proven in the Angus breed that we can move

multiple traits in a favorable direction: taking birth weight down and yearling weight up. Everybody knew that those were two correlated traits that can’t be disassociated,” Matt says. With a selection tool such as a cow longevity EPD, he says the same can be true for reproductive efficiency and growth and performance traits.

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“That’s what can take the Angus breed to the next level — by proving that we can focus on reproductive and growth performance simultaneously and very well,” he says.

Bottom line: Is it worth the wait?

“We’re in the genetics business. We have to wait nine months for a calf to hit the ground. We have to wait a year plus to actually get that calf to do anything for us. We have to be a pretty patient bunch,” Matt says. “To me, if you’ll do the first thing and clean up the cow inventory, then start submitting those breeding records. It’s not going to be a month. It’s going to be years down the road when you finally see the results. I think it’s worth being patient.”

How it works

To participate in MaternalPlus, producers must provide heifer breeding records and, for mature inventoried females, calf records including weight, preweaning or disposal code. If a cow was culled, producers need to record the reason codes for each female. For example, if a female is

used as a donor dam in the current year, a reason code will be assigned to the individual so she is not incorrectly disadvantaged for a missed natural calf.

A producer will pay on a per-cow basis rather than per calf. Each cow is charged a \$3 annual enrollment fee, which then replaces her calf’s Angus Herd Improvement Record (AHIR®) weaning weight processing fee.

Breeders can enroll in the program at any time and will have a corresponding re-enrollment date each year thereafter. After initial enrollment, which needs to be issued through AAA Login, Angus

Information Management Software (AIMS) users can continue to report cow records in the same manner as they do currently.

While enrolling in the MaternalPlus program may seem like a daunting task, Tom reminds producers to remember when EPDs first were used. Birth weight EPDs required producers to hang their calves up by a scale within 24 hours of birth, weaning weight EPDs required ranchers to run their calves across the scale, and then yearling weight EPDs required calves to take another trip across the scale. Now, producers invest time, labor and money for DNA testing.

“These breeding records and this MaternalPlus, I don’t think you have to collect one additional piece of data. You still AI (artificially inseminate) them the same way, you still turn bulls out the same way. The only thing you have to change in your management

is submission of those records in a format that can be used,” Tom says. “We all already know when we turn bulls out, when we pick them up, when we did pregnancy checks, if she was open or not, and when she calved. These are all things that are written



down somewhere. We just have to submit the information.”

The American Angus Association Board of Directors recently instituted cash-back incentives for enrolling in MaternalPlus. See page 141 of this issue for details.

If you’re interested in enrolling in the MaternalPlus program or would like to learn more, visit your AAA Login or call the American Angus Association office. [AJ](#)

Editor’s Note: Ali Luety is a communications specialist for the American Angus Association.