

Reading Numbers, Reading Cattle

One young cattleman is continually breeding for cattle that excel genotypically.

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

The fans were blowing loudly in the background; every eye turned towards the arena. Standing in the middle of the show ring, a solitary man's eyes darted between the paper in his hand and the line of cattle posed before him.

In the midst of the excitement, all Gage Long could hear was the pounding of his own heart.

Despite the sense of déjà vu, the Oklahoma Junior Angus Association member was still nervous. His heifer had her gaze locked on the gap in the fence just ahead, already eager to head back to the barn, but Long kept her in line with the rest of the division winners.

Like the year before, Long's face split with a grin as the judge landed the champ slap on side of a heifer Long had raised at his family's ranch in Vinita.

2021 marked the second Phenotype and Genotype Show (PGS) at the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS), and the event in Grand Island, Neb., was the second time Long brought home the purple banner with a bred-and-owned heifer.

"I had no clue we would go to

the magnitude of what we did," the 15-year-old reflects. "It was the best feeling ever."



Gage Long won grand champion in the PGS at the 2020 and 2021 NJAS.

hidden animals. Today, Gage lives with his father, Rance Long, and Laramie Smith, where the trio work together to raise cattle that excel on paper and perform in both the pasture and the real world.

The family runs both a spring- and fall-calving cow herd with a production emphasis on the goal of marketing bulls to commercial cattlemen and females to other registered breeders.

"We focus on performance and EPDs (expected progeny differences), trying to utilize the genetics that will still give us the phenotype and look that we want," Rance explains.

Gage never questioned his desire to work alongside his

father on the ranch, but it wasn't until his older brother, Blake, started competing as a member of the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) that Gage knew he wanted to be on the end of a show halter.

"I thought it was really cool to watch him get out in the show ring and win some classes," he says, "I thought it would be cool if I had the opportunity to do some of that, too. Plus, I enjoy the preparation leading

Sounding out the syllables

A freshman at Adair Public Schools, Long admits reading for his English class isn't at the top of the list for favorite activities, but he has found a passion for reading cattle.

Long is a fourth-generation Angus breeder, coming from a line of cattlemen with a soft spot for black-

up to the show, even the long hours and late-night family discussions.”

Gage exhibited his first heifer at the age of 9 at his county fair. Since then, he’s traveled across the country to show cattle he’s bred back home.

“We let Gage make his own breeding decisions on the cattle that are his own,” Rance explains.

Gage says while he loves the show ring, he never sets out to breed for “show heifers.” He wants his cows to produce calves that can be sold as production bulls — he wants his cows to produce calves that perform in the pasture.

“We focus on numbers without sacrificing functional traits or a desired look. That’s just what we aim for,” he says.

Before his cows are artificially inseminated (Aled), Gage will pick out three potential sires for each of them. He’ll look at the numbers on his cows and find bulls that fill in the gaps on paper. Rance and Laramie discuss the options and help Gage make the final sire selections.

“As he’s maturing, he’s understanding why you have to make a mating decision one way or the other,” Rance says. “He’s getting to where he’s really starting to have a grasp on it.”

He and Laramie emphasize hands-on learning with Gage and say most of their lessons happen chuteside.

“We try to teach him that he needs something that does good and looks good, but can also go out and survive in a pasture setting without a ton of assistance,” Laramie explains.

She says there’s a lot of chatter that happens in the barn, and it’s these discussions where Gage is able to ask questions that help him develop his own opinions on Angus genetics.

“Gage watches and listens,” Rance adds. “There’s always a lot of discussion, and he hears those catchphrases — calving ease, growth, carcass traits.”

Gage has made it his mission to understand numbers on cattle. It’s a skill that has only grown since he started showing.

“Whenever you’re looking at a sale catalog, I can sort which ones might be better off their numbers without even looking at the actual cattle,” Gage explains. “I’ve just learned to be able to read numbers better, and then it’s fun to match the phenotype I like with the numbers.”

The young breeder’s approach to tackling the panel of EPDs at the bottom of a registration paper is about as straight forward as it can be.

“I just look at everything,” he says with a smile and a shrug of his shoulders. “I start at the beginning, and I end at the end.”

Reading line by line

Gage and his family’s focus on numbers led Gage to compete in a PGS event at the Eastern Regional Junior Angus Show before discussion had ever begun for a PGS to be hosted at the NJAS.

Beyond the ability to emphasize the importance of genetics to the younger generation, Rance says the concept of PGS was a great fit for the breeding philosophy he had instilled in Gage and their cattle at home.

“It was kind of a no-brainer that we needed to be a part of it,” he says. “It’s an event that any junior can have the opportunity to show in regardless of their breeding program at home. It fits with programs like ours that are breeding to produce bulls utilizing EPDs.”

It didn’t take any convincing to get Gage on board with entering in the NJAS’s PGS, and in the months leading up to the show, Gage spent time in the barn with Rance and Laramie selecting which heifers would be competitive.

Continued on page 128



Laramie, Rance and Gage

Gage says he had five heifers pulled aside based on their numbers. Standing in the pasture with Rance and Laramie, he evaluated the females to find which ones had the “it factor” for the show ring.

Gage spent the summer of 2020 rinsing, feeding and working Long Lucy 909. When the duo headed to Tulsa, Okla., for the NJAS and PGS, he says he was hopeful for a chance at a division title.

“Dad and Laramie kept saying if I worked hard enough, I’d have a shot,” Gage says. “I kept working to make them halfway proud.”

Gage was confident in his heifer’s genetics, but he admits show day kept him on his toes.

“He’s a nervous Nellie the day of,” Laramie jokes.

At the end of the that week in Tulsa, however, nerves were the last thing on all three of their minds as Gage was handed the champion banner.

“It was super rewarding for Laramie and me to watch Gage do that,” Rance says. “He was super jacked up about it. When he can find success in the show ring, we all can enjoy it.”

Gage was all too eager to get back home and read numbers on his

females to start preparing for his return to the 2021 PGS.

Long Lady 971 was a clear favorite for their showstring in Grand Island, Neb., from the moment she hit the ground as a calf. She performed even better on paper than last year’s champion, and Rance, Laramie and Gage all thought she had the phenotype to back up the numbers.

Despite their excitement, Laramie says she and Rance made sure Gage wasn’t just focusing on his past win.

“I think the second show was harder,” she admits. “There’s so much pressure, and you want to do good, but nothing is guaranteed.”

The family reminded themselves that no matter where the heifer placed in class, they knew she would be able to come home and produce a quality calf year after year.

“We reminded him that he had already won once,” Rance says. “Most kids don’t get that opportunity, and we said, ‘You might not get that ever again.’”

Gage found himself cautiously optimistic leading up to show day, but by the time he was in the show ring, he says he wasn’t even thinking about the title anymore. The heifer

wasn’t the biggest fan of parading around the show ring, and all of Gage’s energy went to making sure they were both calm and showing like they had practiced at home.

“I knew we had a good shot at it, and I knew the judge liked her,” Gage says, “but I don’t know how to explain it — I was surprised.”


After receiving the champion slap once again, excitement took over again for the entire family. Laramie says all three of them were emotional, but it’s that pride in what they do with their cattle that makes the entire experience worth it.

“The most rewarding thing for both years was that both those heifers are B&O,” Rance adds. “The fact that we bred these heifers makes it that much more special to us.”

Both past champions still call Vinita, Okla., home. Their days being rinsed might be over, but they still recognize the sound of a feed bucket.

The females serve as donors for the family’s embryo transfer (ET) program and have raised a calf at their side. Gage is already looking to those calves as potential competitors in the NJAS’s PGS.

“I get to see the fruit of my labor,” he explains. “I get to see the calves hit the ground, and I get to see them as they grow up, and I get to put work into them.”

It’s this inborn love that brings Gage back to read numbers and read cattle every day, and it’s a passion he says he can’t wait to continue for the rest of his life. 



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