



JANET MAYER PHOTOS

*As Sugar Loaf Farms owner J. Gray Ferguson and farm manager Jeff Kaufman (pictured) planned to expand the herd, they decided not to buy females from other breeders, but to keep females from their own breeding.*

# A New Era AT SUGAR LOAF FARMS

BY JANET MAYER

**F**or all Angus breeders, new and old alike, replacement heifers are a valuable commodity and an investment in the future of their herds. By using top-quality heifers, breeders can be assured of continued introduction of new and improved genetics into the herd through maternal lines.

For breeders wanting to replace females in their herds, or for those wishing to increase herd size, the choices are pretty simple — either purchase heifers from another Angus operation or produce them from within your own herd.

For those who want to increase herd size quickly, the latter method can be

agonizingly slow; however, the process can be significantly shortened with an aggressive breeding program making use of expected progeny differences (EPDs) artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET).

**At Sugar Loaf Farms** near Staunton, Va., owner J. Gray Ferguson and farm manager Jeff Kaufman attest these methods do help increase herd size rapidly. Over the past six years, they have built a herd of 150 purebred females into one that now numbers 550. Their ultimate goal is to give the operation's registered and commercial Angus herds a whole new identity with the

use of what they classify different bloodlines and fresh genetics.

Although the operation enjoys a long history in the Angus industry, the present Angus herd is an exciting new chapter that has unfolded at the operation since Ferguson purchased it in 1900. Kaufman came to work at Sugar Loaf that same year, managing the first cattle under Ferguson's ownership, a herd of about 300 commercial black cows of mostly Angus breeding.

"After the cattle calved in the spring of 1991, we encountered a problem when it was time to breed them back," Kaufman recalls. "We had decided to keep the calves straight Angus, just to keep it a more consistent product, but we found we couldn't find the kind of registered bulls we wanted to use. It was then we decided to get into the registered end of the business and the first registered Angus were reintroduced into the operation."

**Finding bloodlines** that would breed functional cattle that could perform on grass yet allow the cattle to also excel in a feedlot was of major concern when buying cattle for the new herd.

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## SUGAR LOAF FARMS cont.



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A graduate of Pennsylvania State University and a veteran of the show world, finding a source of foundation cattle was not a problem for Kaufman. He was familiar with many Angus producers.

Kaufman turned to Summitcrest Farms of Ohio and Liberty Cattle Company of Virginia to supply performance cattle from top pedigrees that fit their idea of an optimum foundation for the herd. Seventy head of 2-year-old Summitcrest females, bred to QAS Traveler and Bando 155, were purchased shortly after calving. Another group of about 75 females came from Liberty Cattle Company, giving the base herd pedigrees from 2100, Power Play and Independence.

**Wanting to build the** original herd of 150 cows into a much larger herd that would meet their prerequisites became quite a challenge. They decided to build the herd, not by buying females from other breeders, but by keeping females from their own breeding, Kaufman recalls.

"We felt by going this route it would give us the ability to control the program more efficiently," he says. "I remember at one time during our building process, we did buy a group of commercial bred heifers from Montana. It just took them an awful long time to get acclimated to Virginia and the fescue in our pastures. This experience added to our belief that it would be best to use females from our own program."

**I think everybody needs to do their own thing and find the right niche for their operation.**

Both the purebred and the commercial herds at the operation are basically managed like commercial cattle. In both herds, cows have to be easy-fleshing, able to raise a good calf and able to do it mostly on grass. Most of the feed for the cattle is grown on the 3,500-acre farm. About 90% of the feed consists of forages, with a small amount of corn silage and small grains.

For the Sugar Loaf breeding program, Kaufman says strict attention is paid to EPDs, including those on carcass traits. Cattle used must also be phenotypically correct.

Although proven sires like Oscar 711, Independence, Stevenson Fortune 425C, Papa Forte 1921, Ferdinand, GDAR Traveler 044, Sitz Traveler 8180, RR Scotchcap 9440, Rito 3W3, CH Quantum 3330, Rito3X25 and Sitz Traveler 8562 are the mainstay of the program, young unproven sires are occasionally tried.

"Sometimes we get very good results," Kaufman says. "We used the California Traveler bull on some of our cows in 1996, and he produced calves that we think are exceptional. As far as I know, those calves were the first group to sell in the East. They were sold at our fall production sale last year, which I think was probably a drawing card."

**To establish a new identity** for the Sugar Loaf herd, Kaufman says they are trying to use bloodlines that differ somewhat from what most other breeders in their area are using. To achieve this goal, they have accelerated their ET program over the last several years using high-quality embryos from four or five top cow families across the country, including the Jestress family, the Elba family, the Blackbird family and the Forever Ladies family.

Plans call for this breeding season to be the last time embryos are bought from other breeders. One Sugar Loaf female was flushed this past year, and hopes are high they will be able to supply embryos from their own program to fill their needs in the future.

Two cow families that have already made their mark in the Sugar Loaf herd are the Heather Blooms family, an old pedigree that traces back to the old Sugar Loaf herd, and the Jaunty cow family. Others Kaufman considers outstanding are the Annuity family and the Black Cap Lance family.

For the past two years, calving season at the operation has started in mid-January and ended in March for about 80% of the herd. The remaining females calve in the fall. Calving is normally done within a 60-day period, but the slightly wider spread occurred because of the embryos being placed in the commercial cows.

"It gets really crazy here at calving season with a herd this large," Kaufman says. "Especially in the years when we calve everything in just 60 days. The cows calve out on pasture with employees going through twice a day to check and tag. The heifers are checked every three to four hours and locked up at night and fed a little grain and corn silage, then turned out

during the day, This plan works well, and most of the heifers tend to calve during daylight hours. Since we use light-birth-weight bulls, we find we don't have too many problems."

Management for first-calf heifers and 2-year-olds is stringent since they are expected to go into calving season at a body condition score of 6 or 7 and maintain good condition to assure they will breed back. Mineral packs are fed, which Kaufman feels helps in breeding. The heifers are heat synchronized once and bred AI to bulls with no more than a +1 birth weight EPD, then turned out with a light-birth-weight cleanup bull that comes from the Sugar Loaf herd.

The purebred heifers are fed a little grain during their mid-trimester through calving and into breeding. They are given the highest quality grasses, turning them into the pastures before the mature cows.

The commercial herd is kept at another location that provides the herd with corn silage through a 400-head silo feeding system. Because the commercial heifers are kept at this facility, they receive a ration slightly different than their purebred counterparts. Otherwise, both groups are managed the same before and after calving.

"Basically the management for both of our herds is identical," Kaufman explains. "I think this is a real plus when we sell our purebred cattle to commercial breeders because they see we run both of our herds the same and don't pamper our purebred cattle or feed them heavily."

Most of the commercial cattle at the operation are sold within a 50-mile radius by private treaty. Last year, for the first time, some of the 250 commercial females were offered for sale. Prior to that time, all heifers were kept as replacements.

For the past two years, the operation has retained ownership of steers to gain carcass information. In February, 215 Sugar Loaf steers were trucked to Premium Feeders in Kansas to feed out.

"A program like this is the second-best thing to seeing a carcass hanging on the rail," Kaufman says. "We view it as almost a necessity because the commercial breeders we sell to are becoming very knowledgeable and want to see carcass information. Someone once told me, you don't have to collect any carcass information, but remember, sooner or later you will have to compete with those who do."

Kaufman believes that having good

## The history of Sugar Loaf Farms

Before the operation's first production sale last year, farm manager Jeff Kaufman did a little digging. He says he found the history of the farm and the Angus herd to be quite interesting.

The original tract of the 3,500-acre farm, located in Virginia's historic Shenandoah Valley, dates back to 1773. The farm is named after a distinctive cone-shaped hill on the property, and its logo is designed after an 1800s brick grist mill located near the regal white house where the farm office is situated.

The original Angus herd dates back to the late 1940s. Over the next 30 years, the herd came into national prominence by exhibiting numerous international champions and holding record-setting sales with cattle of the Scottish Prince, Dor-Mac's Bandoliermere 100, Ranger, Hig Bandolier and Colossal bloodlines. The farm was operated as a division of Silverbrook Farms from 1977 until 1990 when it was bought by J. Gray Ferguson who reintroduced registered Angus cattle to Sugar Loaf pastures.



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carcass information is a plus in marketing both the commercial and the purebred cattle and credits this information for adding to the success of the operation's first production sales this past year.

The spring offering consisted of 50 yearling bulls, and the fall sale sold 40 bred cows with heifer calves at side and 10 bred heifers. With a strong market for females in Virginia, Kaufman says future plans call for selling 200 females every year and 75-100 bulls.

"In the cattle industry, I think everybody needs to do their own thing and find the right niche for their operation," he says. "What works for one might not work for another, and you also have to breed cattle that work in your scenario."

"Above all else, I think all of us in industry need to keep in mind that selling beef should be the bottom line in everything we do because, sooner or later, these cattle are going to be slaughtered and eaten by someone." 