

The Road to QUALITY



A father-son team discovers the road to quality and profit is the same one traveled by value-selected Angus cattle.

STORY & PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

One cold, autumn day about 10 years ago, John David and his son Troy stood at a crossroads without signposts, trying to find the route to consistent profit for their cattle enterprise. Would they keep to the crossbred road and sell calves, or would they start retaining ownership on feed? Would there be enough income on their Lenora, Kan., farm for two families down one of those roads?

Troy was just about to start college at nearby Fort Hays State University, and the father-son team was entering a new era in cattle production. They planned to build consistent quality into the herd, then realize full value by finishing their calves on the farm.

“When we started using Angus bulls, it was after several years of using Salers,” John says. Prior to that, the Davids had been the first area producers to use Charolais bulls,

Above: While contemplating future opportunities for the Lenora, Kan., farming operation, John David and his son Troy committed to retaining ownership and feeding their calves. They are building their future on Angus genetics.

Below: The Davids are well-satisfied with their herd of 320 commercial Angus females.

going back to 1959. Disposition and demand problems for their cattle led to the search for an Angus solution. By the time Troy graduated in 1995, they had a base of purebred commercial Angus cows and were confident enough to get serious about feeding.

Continual education

Both of them knew their education would continue. They had been consulting with Dodge City, Kan., feedlot nutritionist Russ Smith ever since the days when they stood at that crossroads. If they were going to feed, they knew it would take expert advice, and they credit Smith for any success they have achieved.

“They definitely experienced some trial and error — on implants for example,” Smith recalls. “They also went through a couple of breeds before deciding Angus was what they wanted to use for cows and [to] buy for feeders.”

They started with the basics of concrete bunks and aprons and facilities to handle the larger cattle, Smith says. “The Davids learned quickly and have made many improvements to complete their 1,000-head facility over the last few years.”

David Ranch was among the first to sign on as a partner in the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Feedlot Licensing Program (FLP).

“They’re top-notch managers who pay close attention to detail, and it shows in their results,” Smith says. For example, last year 112 steers from the David cow herd graded 64% Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) and Prime, 96% Choice or higher, and more than 93% Yield Grade (YG) 3 or better, returning \$78/head premium on the U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) grid. With the kind of Angus feeders they buy to fill pens, three growth implants still can allow 30%-40% CAB acceptance, John says.

The Davids don’t take credit for much on their own. Early involvement with a registered Angus breeder, then with USPB and CAB, has taught them a lot, they say. With success comes satisfaction in feeding. “If we change anything now, it will be to farm less and feed more,” John says.

Going straight

Well satisfied with their herd of 320 commercial Angus females, the Davids say their herd’s genetic quality is a direct tribute to

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the source of their first bulls. They have been back to North Platte, Neb., for every Rishel Angus production sale since the early 1990s, Bill Rishel says. “The lessons are there to be learned, but not everyone pays attention in class and puts it all together to make it work the way the Davids have,” he says.

“By the time we were feeding, we had culled everything with Salers blood out of the herd,” John says. “Some people advocate crossbreeding or composites, but we don’t have any trouble with straight Angus. Our steers may not gain quite as well, but we get along all right on our bottom line — we’d sure have to give up some grade to crossbreed. One of my biggest surprises was that we didn’t lose anything in weaning and yearling weights when we went to Angus bulls.

“Bill [Rishel] came down here a couple of times to look at the cows, then to look at steers and the yearling heifers we were keeping,” John says. Early on, the questions for his purebred Angus producer were philosophical: “Can we make a success of this with straightbred Angus rather than crossbred cattle?”

“I’m careful how I address that because most of the industry promotes crossbreeding — even the term ‘seedstock’ suggests we should deal with more than one breed,” Rishel says. “But I told him you can succeed with straightbred Angus, if you can raise the bar on both genetics and management. I knew I could compete in the commercial cattle sector with the cattle I had then.”

The Davids admit they didn’t pour over volumes of expected progeny differences (EPDs) and pedigrees in selecting their bulls because of their confidence in Rishel’s program. “We saw the results in that herd, knew it was what we wanted here,” John says. “Bill had already done a tremendous amount of selection and put a lot of emphasis on numbers.”

In fact, Rishel pioneered value-based selection with Glen and Sally Dolezal when the pair was at Oklahoma State University. “I still think we’ll see selection based on carcass value and not just somebody’s idea of carcass merit,” he says. Until that time, he makes it a point to include positive values for both sides of some generally offsetting traits. “There are many genetic antagonisms in the population, such as marbling and ribeye area, and birth

weight and yearling weight — we have to find the sires that defy those antagonisms.”

Bull battery

Troy artificially inseminates (AIs) the Davids’ heifers, but natural service was the only option for cows, he says. “We can’t justify all the time on hay in the corrals, and even if we synchronized them, we’d still need bulls out there.” Many of the pastures are too large for a single cleanup bull, and the Davids still want the best quality service available.

That meant a considerable investment in bulls. “We’ve bought a lot of \$4,000 and \$5,000 — even \$6,000 — bulls to get the best by natural service,” John says. “Sometimes



“Those cattle defy the skeptics who say you can’t produce that high-quality, high-value carcass with straightbred cattle or while improving the function and value of your replacement heifers,” says bull source Bill Rishel of the David cow herd.

you have problems after a year or two and don’t get full value out of them, but that’s the breaks. I look at the calves people wean out of \$1,500 bulls, and there’s no comparison. Our vet picked out a set of steers and wanted to know if they were ours. Yep. And we know they’ll work on the bottom line.”

Rishel says he “may have helped supply some guidance and genetics, but the Davids have sought to improve all parts of their operation to make a success of the whole.” In effect, they are operating at that required higher level. “There’s no question, you have to aim higher and have a more definable target when you start trying to breed cattle to add carcass value to everything else they have to do.

“One of the most beautiful things that I see in the David Ranch operation is — not just that \$78 premium last May — but the fact that they’ve been able to accomplish that and develop the best set of young cows they’ve ever owned,” Rishel says. “Those cattle defy the skeptics who say you can’t produce that high-quality, high-value carcass with straightbred cattle or while improving the function and value of your replacement heifers.”

Troy keeps track of cow families on the computer and is starting to build a performance index.

“We trace every calf back to the cow,” he says. “Most are in multiple-sire pastures, but we use half brothers to improve uniformity.” Carcass data, weaning weights, cow weights and percent of body weight weaned all enter into the records.

“We have been keeping any acceptable heifers but sold 30 of them last year because we had expanded to fill our available pastures,” Troy adds. “We’re ready to rank

them and cull by the numbers now.” With the quality built in, no extreme culling rate is warranted, so there may be more replacements to sell this fall.

Maybe.

When the cow-calf pairs are on the 12-mile trail that leads to summer pasture, riding along at 3 mph, Troy has time to think. He can’t keep his mind off the next crossroads, where a great-uncle’s retirement is a sign pointing to opportunity, down another road that might require a few more of the best heifers.



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