

DON COFFEY

Determined to challenge his cows

by Nancy Ann Sayre

“If a breeder tries to select for too many things within his lifetime, he’ll wind up with nothing,” says Don Coffey. Owner of Coffey Farms, Martinsville, Ind., he depends on the corn and Angus cow-calf operation for his sole source of income. He is convinced every breeder needs to appraise the old Angus cow and establish some objectives. Simple, clear-cut, realistic objectives.

“Primarily, we want to come up with good weaning weights,” he says. “And at the same time we must come up with a cow that is easy to keep, is very productive and fertile. I would hope a person could select for fertility and good weaning weights simultaneously.”

Coffey was born, raised and continues to headquarter on the family farm just south of Indianapolis. He points out that nearly 75 percent of Indiana’s beef cow population (about 400,000 head) is concentrated in the

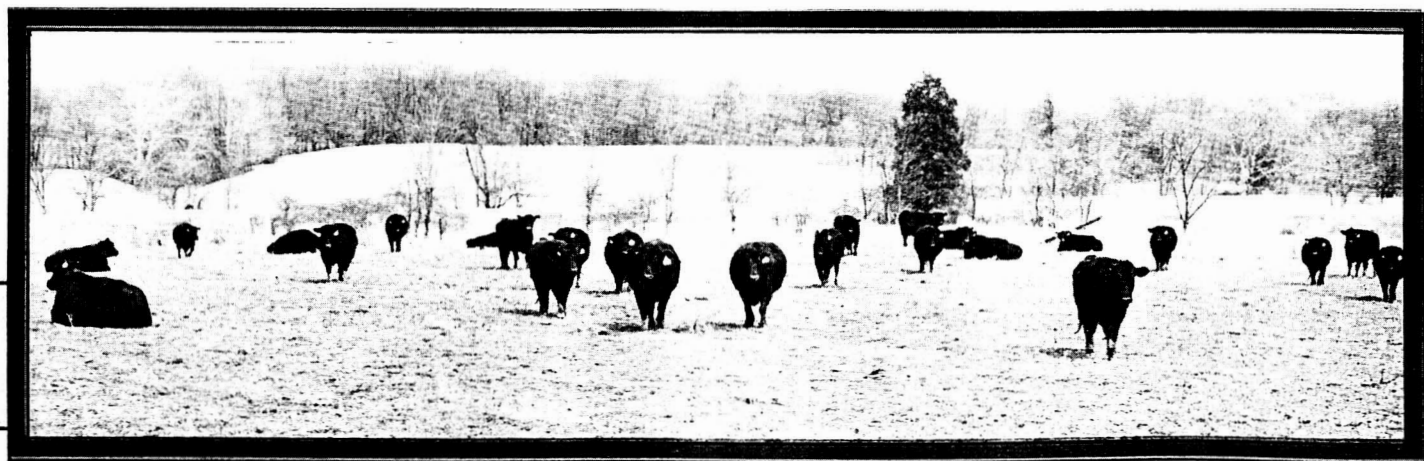
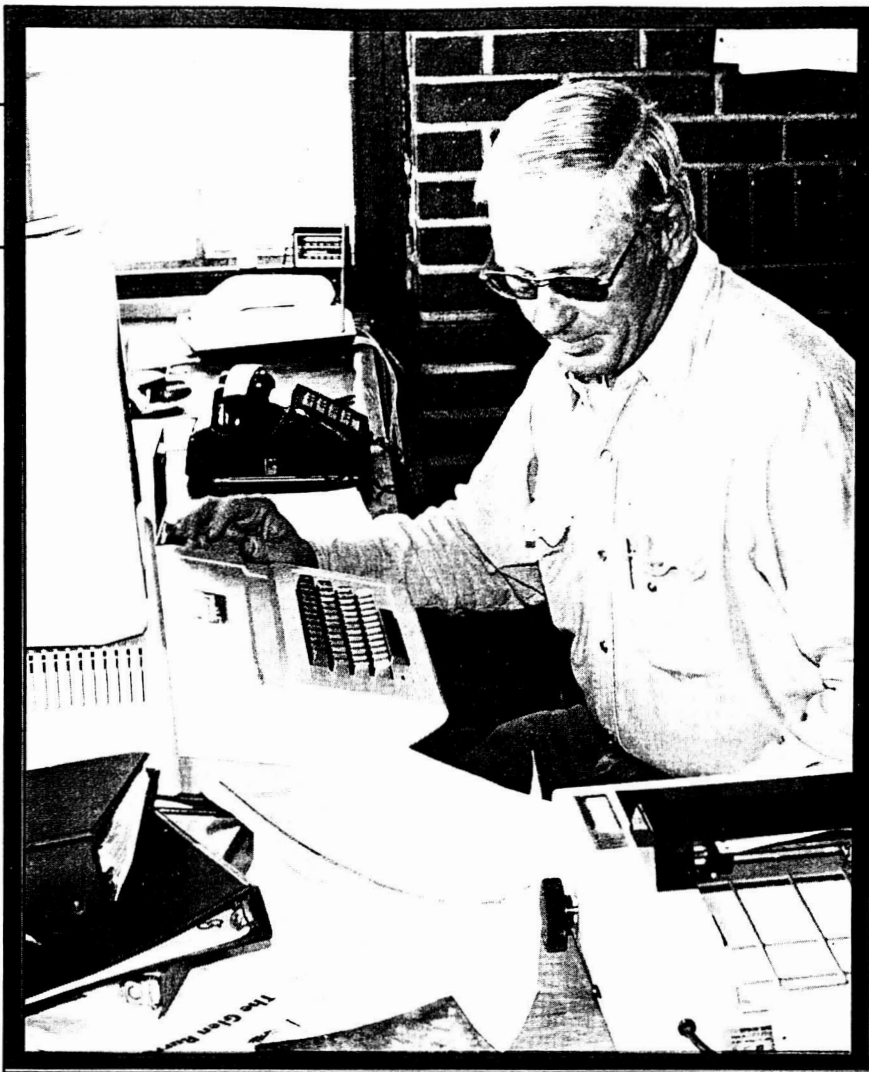
state’s southern portion, so his operation sits at the upper edge of strong commercial cattle country.

“We sell a lot of bulls (20 to 30 annually) in that area, and my primary goal has been to produce bulls that will work for breeders down there,” he explains. “We have to look at weaning weights because most of those guys sell calves at weaning time. And we look at maternal traits because most of

them are going to keep a few daughters back.

“When I start selling bulls to feedlot operators and packing companies, then I’ll begin to worry about yearling weights and carcass traits.” And he adds, “usually yearling weights take care of themselves when you get good weaning weights.”

Angus breeders have a relatively easy job in Coffey’s eyes. “Other breeds have prob-



Coffey challenges his females—heifers and cows alike. He selects for weaning weight and fertility, breeding even his young replacement females to high growth sires.

lems selecting for color, polled traits and all these other things we already have—we've eliminated all that and can concentrate more on quality."

It is vital, he says, that Angus breeders take advantage of those facts, mapping their direction and concentrating on a maternal breed—economical cows that can convert forages to milk and keep themselves in good reproductive shape. Especially now, in the wake of a tough winter.

"There are too many comments these days that crossbred cows just cannot make it through the winter," he stresses. "Commercial men want to come back to the Angus base and we need to make sure the quality is there."

Coffey aims to do just that. He summarizes his approach: "I want those cows to work for me . . . that's why I keep lots of records, objectively."

Cows work for him

Step one in determining which cows work is a limited breeding season. Coffey's A.I. and cleanup breeding period lasts 75 days for heifers and mature cows. (About 40 females are bred to calve each spring; between 70 to 100 drop calves in the fall.)

Next, says Coffey, "we pregnancy check everything. Then we get a live calf out of them. We'll give heifers a second chance, but not the old cows.

"We sort and weed . . . and we'll sell quite a few top end cattle." But most importantly, he adds, "we cull 'em as we see 'em."

And in Coffey's mind, the best time to see what females can do is when they are young—the first time they breed, calve and breed back. In fact, he makes an effort to "shake them out" as heifers.

"One of the biggest, greatest catastrophes is not to realize the potential of a cow," he explains. "And the only way you can do that is to stress her, challenge her."

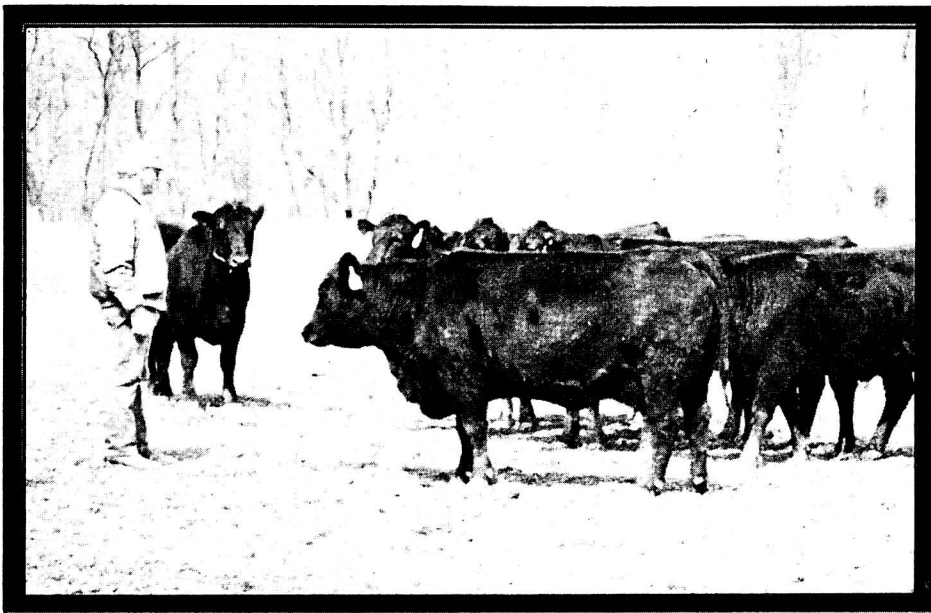
Coffey challenges his cows by using sires which transmit growth—as much growth as he can locate through his own performance information, Sire Evaluation data, and other breeders with generations of strong performance programs.

For the past three years, Coffey's herd has been enrolled as a test herd for the young sires program of Select Sires (A.I. stud in Plain City, Ohio). Through such a program, Coffey randomly mates his females to superior young bulls and proven reference sires. Select Sires receives the comparative performance data from an honest sampling in exchange for semen.

Coffey's breeding program, then, centers around some of the strongest growth traits available. His foremost concern is total pounds of weaned calves, but that translates into heavy birth weights as well.

mature cows, his youngest generation is often mated to bulls most breeders would bypass for heifers because of high expected birth weights. (He has sampled Band 116 of Ideal 2118 7174, "Band 174" with a birth weight EPD of +8.7 lb., and Nichols Landmark L56 with a birth weight EPD of +7.5 lb. on heifers as well as cows.)

The result of such an approach? Coffey loses up to 30 percent of calves born to first calf heifers each year. He justifies the loss, though, with the extra pounds weaned and the genetic progress.



Don Coffey selects for a few basics in his cow herd, concentrating on weaning weights and cows that can convert forages to milk and keep themselves in good reproductive shape.

Birth weight and weaning weight are highly correlated, emphasizes Coffey. "I have yet to find an easy-calving, high weaning weight bull with a high degree of accuracy behind the figures."

His choice is additional growth, and that is the challenge to his cows. Since he randomly breeds his heifers right along with the

"If heifers represent 30 percent of your cow herd and you lose 30 percent of those calves, in effect you are losing just under 10 percent of your calves," he says. "But by challenging the cows with high growth traits you can wean 500-lb. calves and you are better off than going to an easy-calving bull to save 100 percent of your calves if they

DON COFFEY

only wean at 350 lb. And those light calves lack the vigor and stamina at birth, too.

"In the short term, the question is whether you gain or lose by challenging the cows. First, I'm making much more genetic progress. Secondly, we haven't lost a calf out of a cow for three years now other than abnormal presentation."

Shake them out early

Coffey knows he pays hidden prices. Heifers stressed at calving are more likely to have rebreeding problems, but they have a second chance.

"If a heifer nursing a calf doesn't rebreed in 75 days, we'll slip her six months into the next calving period," he says. "If she's not nursing a calf and doesn't rebreed, we put her on feed for 60 to 90 days and make a heiferette out of her."

Heifers that lose a calf but breed back still represent an extra cost. Coffey estimates that all calves such a female produces will be 10 percent lower in performance at weaning because she loses some of her milking ability by not raising a calf the first year.

"We're paying a price, there's no doubt about this," he says, "but I think half the calving problems are in the cow and the best time to shake them out is as heifers . . . eventually you are going to challenge those cows and you're going to catch the ones with calving problems. I think you're better

off to catch them as heifers, sort them out and eliminate them from your herd.

Improved genetics and trouble-free cows are rewards of challenging heifers and cows alike, but Coffey has had to change management practices to help reduce losses and resulting costs.

"In the last few years I've concentrated more on calving the heifers," he says. "We calve them separately and follow a night-time feeding, day-time calving program. And we don't hesitate to pull calves . . . our attitude has changed dramatically from seven or eight years ago when we found all sorts of excuses not to pull a calf.

"Yes, our birth weights have increased about 30 percent—in 1970 our biggest live calf out of a heifer was 72 lb., now we get them up in the 90 lb. or over range—but our survival rate is up and that is most important."

And buyer resistance to heavy birth weight? Coffey feels the answer is an education process.

"We really don't know what impact a bull will have in a herd until that breeder catches a few birth weights of his own. It seems once I convince them to weigh a few calves at birth, the resistance is reduced."

Any commercial or purebred breeder, says Coffey, must simply study available information and determine what will work in a specific environment.

His breeding and selection programs have not always been as well defined as they are today. Coffey has sampled his share of popular, "speculative" bulls that have not worked for him. And he has traveled the crossbred route with disappointing results, as well.

Teacher by trade

Coffey was an insurance major at Indiana University, then later received his master's degree in education and taught for six years. For the past 16 years, though, farming has supported Don, his wife Suzanne, daughter Barbara (15), and son Bill (12).



Coffey farms some 1,600 acres, including his family's home place and 22 other rented farms.

Don first bought cows in 1956, joining his brother Joe in business. They enrolled on Purdue University's performance program within two years (a decision due in part to Joe's background as an economist).

Don bought Joe out in 1960 and continued on a performance-testing course, expanding the registered herd to 40 head and then adding a commercial unit. In 1969 he signed a contract with Pioneer Beef Co., participated for a few years in their program and more than doubled his herd size. Coffey later started doing some young sire evaluation work for American Breeders Service of DeForest, Wis., then branched out on his own for several years before cooperating on the Select Sires program.

Currently, he and one hired man handle the cattle operation and farm 700 acres of corn. Coffey owns and rents some 1,600 acres in all; the land is divided among more than 20 different farms. Because of the short-term and rather volatile nature of the many lease agreements, he is limited in pasture improvement and other long-term planning.

Such a situation is discouraging and results often affect the performance of his cattle. Coffey continues to concentrate on the genetics, though, and looks forward to resulting progress.

"Cattle breeding is a long-term thing," he says. "You have to be at it a while to really reap the benefits. We have to have some long-term goals and decide just where we are going with our Angus cattle." **AJ**



Don's wife Suzanne, along with their daughter Barbara and son Bill, has an interest in the operation, too.