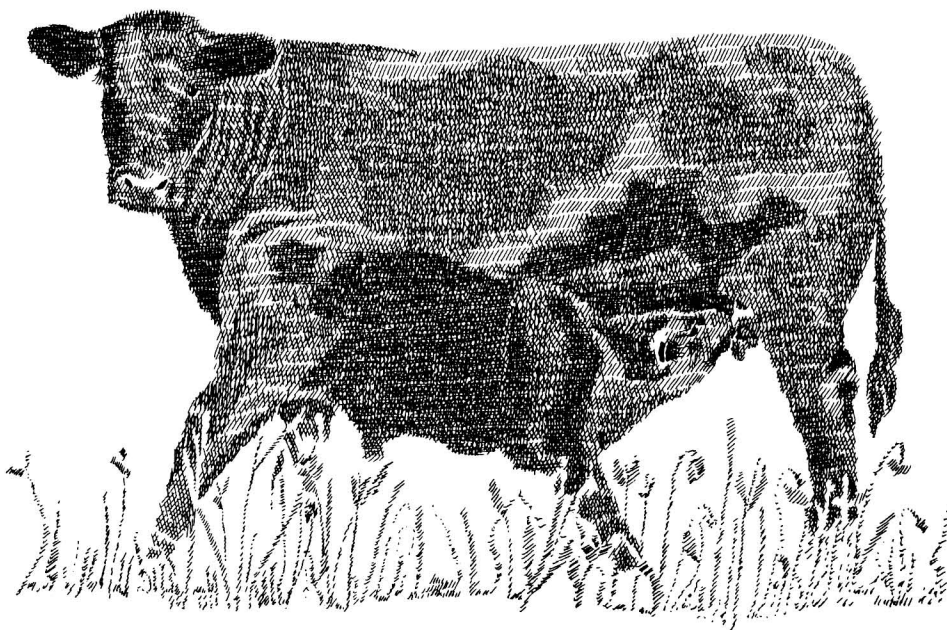


Breeders' Comments

The Pathfinder Report

by Ann Gooding



The 1980 Angus Pathfinder list, published in April's *ANGUS JOURNAL*, identified 2,024 cows out of about 350,000 registered Angus females. Selection was based on AHIR performance records, with emphasis on early puberty, early breeding and calving, calving regularity and above average performance.

Several breeders with a number of cows on the Pathfinder list offer their comments on the program—what it means to them, how they use it, what they like or dislike about it.

Dave and Lee Nichols of Nichols Farms, Bridgewater and Anita, Iowa, had 45 cows listed. They feel the program's value is in emphasizing cows with consistent yearly calving intervals. Their customers, cow-calf men, must have cows that will calve every year; in fact, those cows can't even slip back one or two cycles, since it could cost their calves 50-100 lb. at weaning.

The Nichols brothers like the emphasis the Pathfinder program puts on measuring female traits. Lee comments, "There are so many breeders talking about maternal traits today, but most of them are not doing any measuring." Those with cows on the Pathfinder list are.

Fred Johnson, Summitcrest Farms, Summitville, Ohio, showed up with 32 Pathfinders. Summitcrest manager **Henry Bergfeld** thinks the Pathfinder program is a great management tool. It identifies cows that are reproductively efficient, he says, those that get right back in calf and have above average milking ability. Although the program does nothing to identify kind—e.g., frame, scale, size—Bergfeld says

generally the cows among Summitcrest's Pathfinders are the right kind.

Bergfeld feels the program has another important function. It identifies good management and good personnel—"those guys out there getting their jobs done." And he has one suggestion. Since he feels it is more difficult for a cow being bred A.I. to get on the Pathfinder list, it might be beneficial if the report noted the type of breeding program each Pathfinder is under.

Dick Mercer, one of four brothers involved in Paint Rock Angus Ranch, Inc., Hyattville, Wyo., and Lavina, Mont., feels the Pathfinder program did pick some of the best Paint Rock cows in the 25 it listed, but he says it missed a few, too. And, he points out, even though a cow may lose a calf through no fault of her own, she is still taken off the list. So Mercer says, "It's a new program and we're watching it."

The Mercers have used performance records since 1957 when they joined a program through the University of Wyoming; then they went on AHIR in its early days. Now, however, they pay a little less attention to performance, a little more to eyeballing, using a grading system that recognizes the importance of structure. Their modified program does seem to parallel AHIR records, though, Mercer says.

Bub Severson, Clark, S.D., has been involved in AHIR for 14 years. Without records he might be tempted to keep some big fat but not very productive cows, he says. "You can't keep everything in your head. You need records." Several years ago when he had to reduce his 250-head herd by half, records determined the cut. Now he relies

on records for management. And he says his customers, commercial breeders interested in pounds, like performance records. And Severson's 25 Pathfinders? They are, he says, the top cows in the herd.

The Pathfinder program, says **Tom Elliot** of N-Bar Land & Cattle Co., Grassrange, Mont., is not really an end in itself. It is a statistical entity, a means of measuring genetic impact on maternal traits. The registered business is the genetic testing ground for commercial cattle, he feels, so the Pathfinder program's value lies in identifying bloodlines that will produce quality commercial cows. Elliot, whose herd is home for 20 Pathfinders, feels the program serves another purpose—it brings national recognition to those who have consistently used AHIR.

Pat Goggins' Vermilion Ranch, Billings, Mont., also had 20 cows on this year's list. And **Bob Cook**, former American Angus Assn. regional manager who is in charge of Vermilion's records, likes the Pathfinder program—primarily because it recognizes the Angus cow and her strongest traits. Among Vermilion's Pathfinders, he says, are most of the herd's best cows. However, the program does miss some of the better cows, he says, while it includes some he would not consider top individuals. And because Vermilion has been on AHIR just five years, some of the herd's good-producing older cows are not included on the Pathfinder list.

But over-all, Cook says, the program does identify Vermilion's better cows. And quite a few of the higher priced bulls in the

ranch's sale last December were out of Pathfinders.

Ray Felton, Felton Angus Ranch, Big Timber, Mont., is pleased that the ranch has 19 Pathfinder Cows among the 200 they have on AHIR. He points out that Pathfinders are not necessarily the larger cows in the herd, but they are consistent breeders. And that, Felton believes, is worth quite a bit. He intends to start using their standing on the Pathfinder report as a promotional aid for the ranch's annual February sale. Not doing that, Felton says, is kind of like having a train ticket and not using it.

"I think it's a heck of a good deal," says **Wayne Stevenson**, Moccasin, Mont. He hasn't always felt that way, he admits. In fact, in 1978 when the first report came out, he didn't think much of the program at all. That year four of his six Pathfinders had already been sold because they didn't meet his standards. However, as the program progressed, the cows he didn't like went off the list and now all of his 18 Pathfinders are good cows. Not only that but all of the 12 younger cows on this year's list are out of his herd's best cows.

Although Stevenson likes the program, he would like to see some provision made for a cow that falls behind as a 2-year-old so she can eventually earn her way on the list—perhaps, he says, by producing Pathfinder daughters or earning a high nursing index or calving at less than 12-month intervals until she catches up with the herd.

A cowman has to produce weight. He is selling pounds, says **Melvin Slagle** of Slagle Angus, Sargent, Neb., but weight doesn't tell the whole story. Just because cattle are heavy doesn't mean they are good. So Slagle uses performance information as just one of several management tools.

The same goes for the Pathfinder report. He says it identifies some of his good cows (Slagle has 18 listed this year), but since it is only part of his program, he doesn't take it too seriously by itself. All Slagle cows still have to measure up to eyeballing, he says.

To **Bill Borrer**, Tehama Angus Ranch, Gerber, Calif., the Pathfinder program indicates the predictabilities that are being bred into a cow herd. At Tehama the highest percentage of the 17 Pathfinders are young cows, which he feels is an indication that their breeding program is moving in the right direction. And the seven 3-year-olds on the list came out of a group of 40 replacement females—that's 17½% earning Pathfinder status. Borrer feels the program serves another purpose; it shows up weaknesses. Several years ago, he suspected a couple bulls were not doing much good in the Tehama herd. Proof of that showed up later; each bull after two seasons' work had sired only one Pathfinder.

Since performance is a measure of progress, Borrer believes any performance program, Pathfinder included, benefits only those who have been on it for a while.

Thiessen Angus, Lambert, Mont., went on AHIR, then dropped it in 1971 because it was duplicating another program. By 1976, though, the Thiessens had returned to AHIR because, according to **Jim Thiessen**, they felt it offered more.

The Pathfinder program encourages breeders to performance test all calves, not just the better ones, and he thinks it might even encourage someone to go on the performance program. He calls the report an honor roll for cows and believes that it does a good job of selecting top cows on a national basis. Thiessen thinks it does emphasize the breed's strong maternal traits to a certain extent. However, his high indexing cow is not a Pathfinder, he says, because one of her calves was sold before being weighed.

Lynn Pope of Pope Ranches, Inc., Merrill, Ore., a firm believer in AHIR, feels that everyone producing seed stock should be on a performance program. And he likes the Pathfinder program, pointing out that it has double value. It can be used in promotion, and it identifies cows doing a good job. Although the program sometimes selects cows that aren't all that good, he says, he doesn't feel that's a great drawback because for the most part the list is made up of good cows. And they are producers. Pope, in fact, has at least one Pathfinder cow that has a Pathfinder daughter.

Gordon Booth, spokesman for Henry Booth & Sons, Veteran, Wyo., feels the Pathfinder list will mean more in the future as patterns of bloodlines become more apparent. Even now, after only three years, he finds cows representing a couple of families consistently on the list. The Booths use their Pathfinder Cows in promoting their fall female sale where, by the way, last year's high selling heifer was out of a Pathfinder Cow.

The Booths always have been interested in producing pounds, but Gordon says they became especially performance conscious when they started to A.I. in 1969.

In 1968 when **Darrel Spader**, Hayland Angus Ranch, Fedora, S.D., started on AHIR, there was a 63-point difference between his top and bottom cows. Today, with 110 females, the difference runs about 16-18 points. Spader thinks production records are the only way to go in the registered cattle business. He likes the Pathfinder program even though he says it misses some of his top cows, specifically some whose calves were sold before being weighed.

Spader finds the Pathfinder list is a terrific selling tool in his market, which is

mostly local commercial breeders. In fact, he is re-evaluating some programs with Pathfinder criteria in mind.

There are a lot of things **Bob Thomas** of Thomas Angus Ranch, Baker, Ore., likes about the Pathfinder program. Since it came out without prior notice, every cow had the same chance to be on it, he says. And small breeders can participate. It doesn't cost anything. It promotes AHIR participation. Since it identifies cows that consistently breed back, it is a good tool in an A.I. program.

Thomas feels Pathfinder means something to his customers and says it points to the best strains in the herd, to the strength in the females. For example, Thomas' chief herd sire, Thomas Chaps, is the product of a Pathfinder Cow. Both his grandam and his great-grandam are Pathfinders, and Chaps himself is a consistent breeder who sires good females.

"I am not saying Pathfinders are the greatest producers," Thomas explains. The program is intended to select consistent producers, and that's what it does. It does not indicate type, but he feels that's something buyers can judge for themselves.

Wagonhammer Angus Ranch, Albion, Neb., has participated in the AHIR program since the registered segment of the operation started 15 years ago. Wagonhammer's **Jim Wolf** looks at the Pathfinder program as both a promotional aid and a welcome tool for recognizing top cows. Wolf feels there is a problem, though, and it has to do with Wagonhammer's two calving seasons. A lot of the top cows are bred to calve at two and a half years, and that automatically eliminates them from the program. And he says the two calving groups are subjected to two different environments from birth until weaning; comparisons between the two are not really valid, Wolf feels, so it might be more fair if they were treated as two separate herds. The Pathfinder program, Wolf says, is accurate in its selection of the best cows among the spring calvers.

When the Pathfinder program started, **Clyde Nelson** of Nelson Angus Ranch, Salmon, Idaho, had mixed emotions. Since all figures are ratios and no minimum standards are set, a calf ratioing 107 could actually weigh 250 lb. But as things have developed, he finds the Pathfinder program has become an important part of the performance picture. Although the program may not be perfect, it does point out those cows that consistently raise a calf and do a good job of it. And now, after three years, he says his young cows going on the list are acceptable by eyeballing standards, something he didn't feel was true in the beginning. The program, Nelson says, does what it was intended to do—emphasize fertility and production consistency. And along with all other tools, it has an important part in determining breeders' decisions. 