

Selection and Sound Management at Gartner & Denowh Ranch

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Early in his Angus breeding program, Russ Denowh learned that he couldn't select replacement heifers the same way he did bulls—by putting heavy emphasis on growth and rate of gain.

"Those first years after we started performance testing, we evaluated replacement heifers on their growth from weaning to yearling," the Sidney, Mont., Angus breeder explains. "We got cows with too much muscling and too little femininity, and when they went into the cow herd their nursing ratios dropped below the average of the herd. Today we don't pay much attention to weight gains on heifers. In fact, I would prefer to calve out all our good heifers to see how they produce before picking our replacements."

To qualify for the herd, Denowh cattle must perform under eastern Montana range conditions without any special treatment. For example, a heifer that has weaned a calf isn't automatically a candidate for the breeding herd. She still must recycle and breed back early without any supplemental feed. If not, she is sold. "Sometimes that means culling a big heifer that has weaned a good calf. But if she gives so much milk or is so big that under our program she can't recycle and breed back on time, she has to go. Selling that kind of heifer breaks your heart, but you can't afford to make excuses for cattle that don't perform in all areas and that would be impractical for our customers here," says Denowh.

Value of Records

Denowh knows the value of production records and how to use them. He is on the American Angus Assn.'s Angus Herd Improvement Records program, and his was the second Angus herd to go on the Montana Beef Improvement Program when he enrolled in 1957. That was just two years after he and his father-in-law, Joe Gartner, bought 30 registered Angus cows and formed the Gartner & Denowh partnership. Before that, they had commercial Hereford

cows and used a few Angus bulls in their combination ranching and wheat farming operation.

"The registered business, and particularly production records, were a real challenge to us," Denowh says. "Our records showed then that the larger cattle were the ones we should go to. And we did."

They were able to select against the accepted type of the 1950s, Russ says, because they sold bulls only to commercial cattlemen who even then wanted larger growthier cattle. It's a classic example of the value of knowing your market and matching your product to demand.

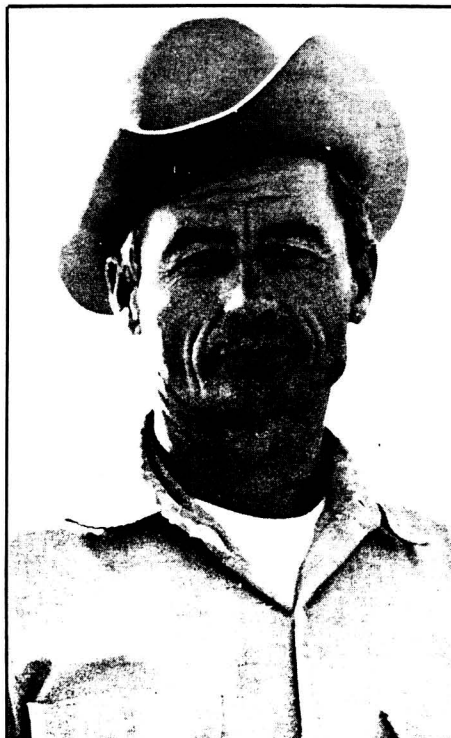
Records Have Buyers' Attention

"The commercial man is my bread and butter," Denowh emphasizes, "and they are getting smarter about bull buying every year. Most of them really pay attention to records when they buy cattle."

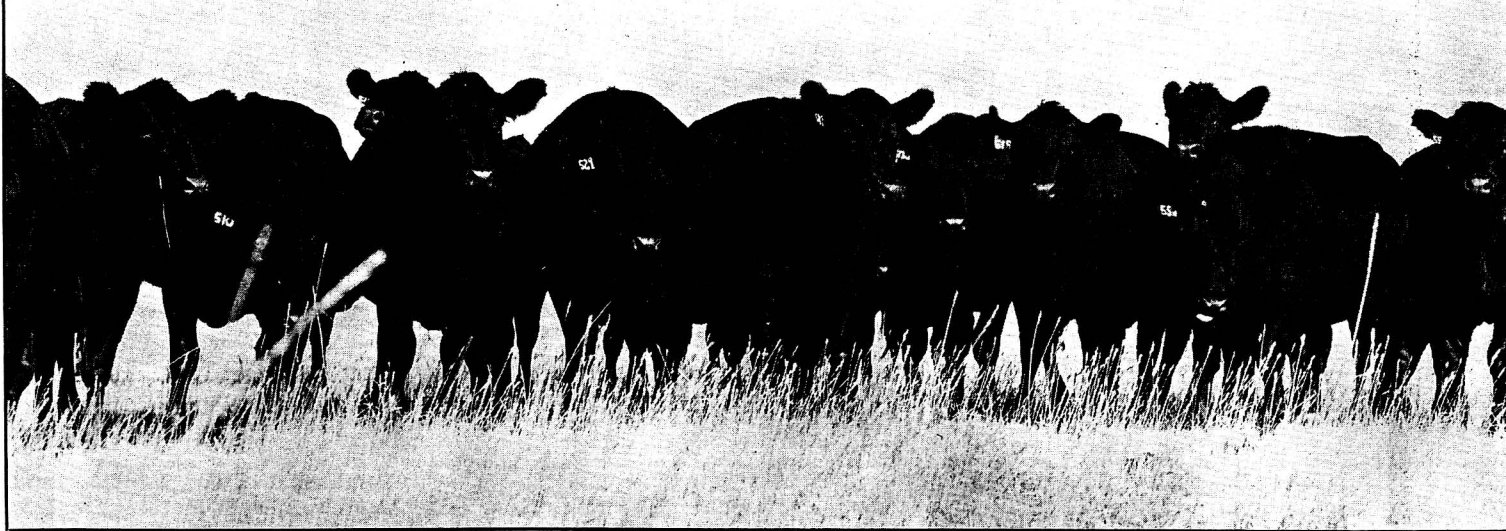
Their first herd bull weighed 1,700 lb. and their second one weighed a ton at maturity. Some 60% of their cows go back to these original sires, some through home-raised bulls Denowh has used with a great deal of success.

Through the years he has found that he needs bulls with frame and volume. He also stays away from round-muscled bulls that look like they will be "carcass" bulls. They can lead to possible double muscling and calving and nursing problems, he says.

One problem with bull testing and selection, Denowh says, is that a bull gets old before you have an opportunity to really see how well his daughters perform. Consequently, they collect and freeze semen on top young bulls (such as Candolier Forever 376, top-ranking bull in maternal traits on the AHIR field data report) as a hedge against the death or injury of what might



A pioneer in performance, Russ Denowh of Sidney, Mont., learned early that he couldn't select replacement heifers using the same criteria he did for bulls. Rather than relying on weight gains in heifers, he prefers to calve out all his good heifers to see how they produce before he picks replacements.



To qualify for the herd, Denowh cattle must perform under eastern Montana range conditions without any special treatment. And a heifer must not only wean a calf, she must recycle and breed back on time. The program, says Denowh, is aimed at raising the best cattle they can for the commercial man.

later prove to be an outstanding sire.

Calf Crop Averages 97%

Careful attention to heifer selection, to bull quality and care of the herd at calving pays off. The calf crop averages 97% on 165 cows. In 1976 it topped 100%. That year they lost only one calf and saved four sets of twins.

The cows are calved near headquarters in a barn that has individual calving stalls in case they are needed. After calving, cows are moved to an adjoining lot with an open shed and later out into open pasture near the barns.

A good culling program also keeps the calf crop percentage high. Most of the cows are sold at 10 years of age, before they develop problems and when they have a high value to other Angus breeders. Cows that don't settle or wean a calf are culled along with poor producers, particularly those that have low nursing ratios and offspring with low yearling weights.

Cows are bred to start calving in mid-February, and 90% of the calves are born in February and March when Russ and his son Mickey have time to take care of them. Mickey is now a partner in the Angus operation, and he and his father have bought out Joe Gartner, who is retired.

Most Bred Artificially

The bulk of the cows are bred artificially, and Russ and Mickey do their own inseminating. They usually use three bulls at a time and add one new bull to their program each year, either one of their own or an outcross. Their program has eliminated some of the guesswork in cattle breeding and at the same time helped identify bulls and females that are most profitable for them and their customers.

Average cow weight in the herd is between 1,100 and 1,300 lb., according to Denowh, with some extreme cows weighing as high as 1,400 lb. The calves last year had 205-day weights of 542 lb. for the heifers and 599 lb. for the bulls. Bulls averaged

1,069 lb. at 365 days, and most mature out at between 1,800 lb. and 2,000 lb.


Calves are weaned in mid-September and the bulls go immediately on 170-day feed test. Weaning weights are used as on-test weights, with no adjustments or warm-up period. The bulls are fed to average about 2.5 lb. gain per day for the entire period. This lets them express their growth potential without getting too fat.

Off-Test Weights

The test ration consists of a pound of oats for each 100 lb. of body weight plus silage and hay, all fed free choice. The alfalfa hay is chopped, with a little home-grown wheat chaff added to keep the feed dry. The bulls come off test averaging about 1,075 lb.

At weaning the heifers are put on a ration of half corn silage and half chopped alfalfa

hay with a little wheat chaff. At the end of 170 days, they average around 775 lb. Denowh wants the heifers to gain 1.25-1.5 lb. a day so that at breeding time they will keep on gaining weight. "Fat heifers," says Denowh, "will loose weight when they are being bred, and this will cut the conception rate."

The bulk of the cattle, both bulls and replacement-quality heifers, are sold at auction on the ranch. Most still go to commercial cow-calf men, both to straight-bred Angus producers and to those who are crossbreeding. "Our program," says Denowh, "is to raise the best cattle we can for the commercial man." And Denowh figures he's doing good if he gets six to eight bulls a year good enough to work improvement in a sound registered Angus operation and deserve the name "herd bulls." 

Russ Denowh (left) and his son Mickey are partners in the Gartner & Denowh operation. Most of the 165 cows are bred artificially, and the two Denowhs do their own inseminating.

