

# DBCS Farms

## Predictable Performance

*At DBCS Farms predictable performance is the name of the game. "We sold a bull last summer that had seven generations on the sire's side and eight on the dam's side in our own herd," says DBCS owner and manager Don Grace, "and the buyer asked me, 'Now what does that calf represent in your cow herd?' I said that calf represents our whole herd. That's it. He was a 6-frame bull and he weighed 1,270 lb. at a year of age."*

The farm's first ANGUS JOURNAL ad appeared in the March, 1981 issue. It painted quite a picture. Listed there were performance figures on 19 bulls born the previous spring and those figures would have done any herd proud.

The 205-day adjusted weights ranged from 639 lb. to 736 lb. and projected 365-day weights were from 1,201 to 1,406 lb. The projected 365-day height of the tallest bull (which happened to be the one with the 1,406-lb. figure) was 52.1 inches; the shortest projected height was 49 inches.

Granted, the 19 listed were the top out of 54 bull calves. But 365-day measurements on all 54 were projected to no less than 1,000 lb.; 25 of them, the figures indicated, would weigh more than 1,200 lb. In fact, final figures in a later ad showed 54 bulls averaging 1,183 lb. and 49.7 inches at 365 days. The biggest weighed in at 1,430 lb. (not the projected 1,406) and measured 52.6 inches.

### No Accident

The cows that produced these calves were part of Don and Betty Grace's DBCS Farm herd which is located near Albany in northwest Missouri. The figures were not arrived at by chance. Grace had spent more than 20 years breeding them into his calf crops.

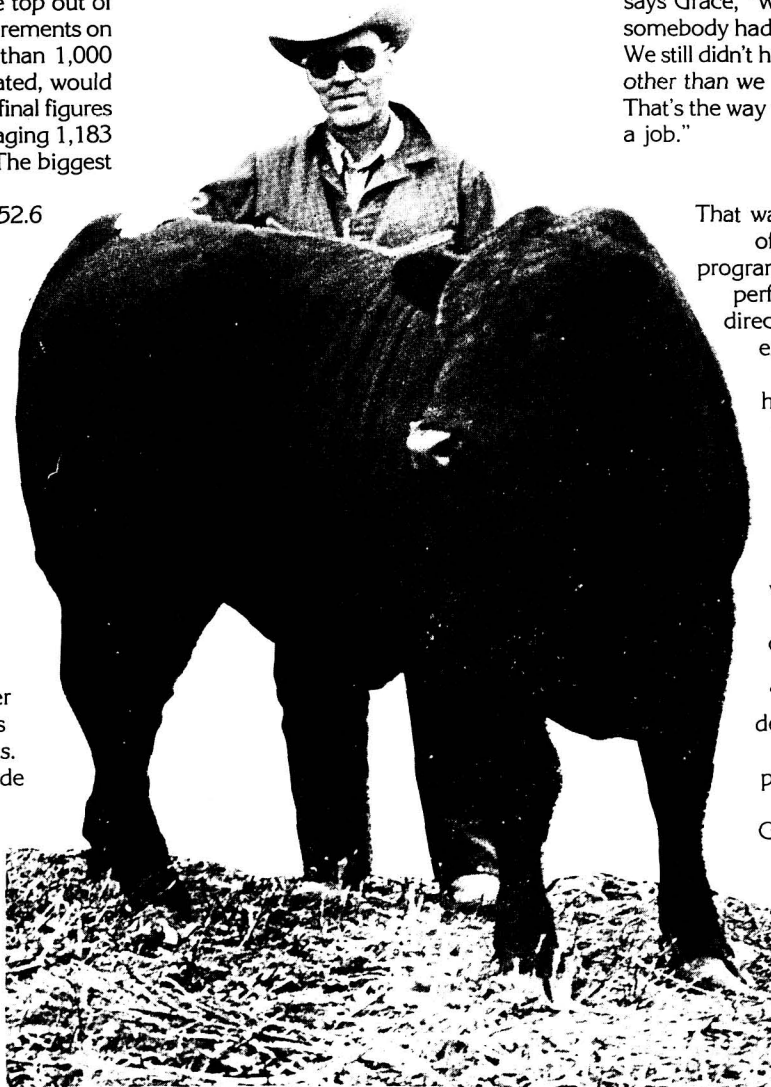
It all started in 1958 when Grace, who then worked for the Federal Land Bank, bought 26 grade cows. Originally, because both Grace and his wife's brother were involved, the operation was called *Grace and Williams Farms*. Registrations, however, were made under the present name—DBCS Farms (which uses the first initials of Don, his wife Betty, son Charles and daughter Susan).

Grace and Williams started their herd with picks from association auctions and private sales. "I didn't pay much attention to pedigrees because I didn't know anything about

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*DBCS-bred bulls speak well for Don and Betty Grace's performance program. For the past few years, at least one or two home-bred bulls outranked A.I. sires when it came to progeny performance. Grace is pictured here with DBCS Masterpiece M224—proof of the progress being made at DBCS Farms.*

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them," Grace explains, "but I was particularly interested in good conformation. So that's what we selected for. Then once we got a calf out of a cow, we knew what her performance was and we went from there. We kept complete records from then on with the aid of our area livestock specialist, Fred Conner."

Purchases continued along this line until the herd numbered about 150 head; then the herd was closed and built with replacement females.

Choosing bulls was another story. Records were simply non-existent on most bulls so, says Grace, "We'd go buy an older sire that somebody had used. We'd go see his calves. We still didn't have any information on the bull other than we could see what he produced. That's the way we started getting sires. It was a job."

### Enter Pioneer

That was to change with the advent of the Pioneer Beef Cattle Co. program. "It started out strictly as a performance program under the direction of Garold Parks," Grace explains. "They had their own elite herd plus cooperator herds—those on the program owned by individuals like us—and approximately 10,000 cows were involved." All cows were mated randomly to a select group of bulls bred in the program. Calves were tested by Pioneer. And Pioneer guaranteed the sale of 60% of both the bull and the heifer calves.

"It looked like a ready-made deal for us," Grace says. "Not only could we use their performance sires, they'd sell our calves for us."

Grace only deviated from the program in one respect. "I would never let them have a heifer calf," he says. "That almost kicked us out of the deal a time or two because they wanted those heifer calves to share with other breeders. I didn't want to

share my heifers with anybody. Never have. Never have sold a top heifer yet."

The bull calves, however, went through the Pioneer feed test program and consistently came out with flying colors.

### The Program's Influence

It was while Grace was with Pioneer that Rito-bred bulls were used. And the last females—an entire herd from Ernie Wright of

wheat and soybeans we are raising a lot better seed stock than we do in the cattle business.

"In the cattle business you just go out there and you know a bull's a bull and a cow's a cow and maybe the cow weighs 800 lb. and she'll raise a 300-lb. calf every other year—you don't know for sure because nobody keeps track. I feel it's time to raise cattle like hybrid seed corn and merchandise bulls the

sells me seed corn; they have performance on that seed corn. They know what it's going to do. All right. Seed stock is seed stock. Whether it's cattle or corn or whatever, I want to know what I'm getting. I'm not going to buy without knowing and I don't expect the other guy to buy from me unless he knows what he's getting."

### Time, Planning, Dedication

It all comes back to Grace's program based on predictability. It's not complex, but it has taken time, planning and dedication.

The bottom side of the Grace herd has been completely closed for 15 years; in fact, the Wright cows were the only females purchased since the initial herd was put together.

Each year 20% of the cow herd sells and is replaced with the top end of the heifer calf crop. After years of selection, those cows sold are nothing to be ashamed of. "We don't call them culls anymore. We hope it's the bottom 20%," Grace says, "but we make sure they're good breeding cows, cows we are proud of." For the last four years, most of the 20% have sold to registered herds.

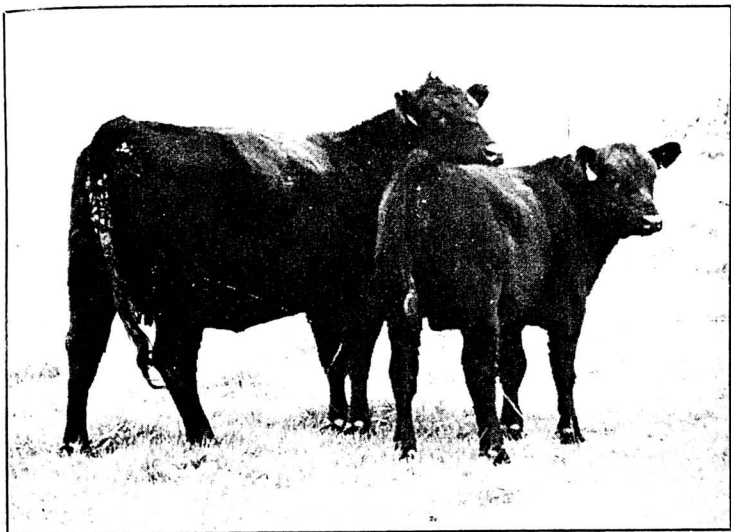
Generations turn fast under this system; half of the present 150-head cow herd is four or less. There are only five or six cows aged 10 or more that have managed to keep meeting Grace's criteria for herd membership. But then it takes an exceptional cow to do that.

### Fertility, Performance, Conformation

Selection procedures have not changed much from the beginning. They are, says Grace, based on three things—fertility, performance and conformation.

First, he says, a cow simply has to produce. Every year. Heifers are bred to calve at two and if they need a little help, that's okay. However, after that first calf they are on their own. No excuses. Grace calves both spring and fall and a female can slip from one calving season to the next. But only once.

After fertility comes performance, and 365-day information carries the most clout. That's the basis on which replacement heifers are selected.



*It's her first calf and this two-year-old has obviously done her job well—DBCS breeding on the top and bottom sides of her pedigree dictates just this kind of performance.*

Waterloo, Iowa—were purchased. They were Pioneer-bred cows and big for the time, with several years of performance behind them.

In 1972 Grace resigned from the Federal Land Bank and devoted all of his time to the cattle. He was, he says, going to get rich quick. Within three years he had 1,000 cows, about half of which were registered. The Pioneer program was a good one with a good market and everything was rolling. "Then," Grace says, "that's about the time the cattle thing went bust. Pioneer quit. And we started pulling our herd down because they were losing money, really, and there's a limit to how much you can do for fun."

The partnership dissolved via dispersal. Grace, however, kept his top 200 cows and bought 50 of the top cows out of the dispersion. Since then a herd that already had a strong performance base has been reinforced and refined to the point that it could produce calves with the figures advertised in the ANGUS JOURNAL.

### Predictable Performance

Predictable performance is what the program is all about; and Grace has some very definite ideas on the subject.

"Good begets good," he believes. "There's no question about it. We can predict what a cow's going to produce because we've selected for so long and anything that wasn't quite up to snuff was selected out. Now they're breeding pretty true."

That, he thinks, is what the cattle business needs. "I contend that the cattle business is about the most obsolete enterprise that we have in the farming industry. The hog people are way ahead of us. Generally, in corn and

same way. We have to have something that's predictable, that has some genetics in it that we know will produce."

### Seed Stock is Seed Stock

"I had a fellow here the other day. He said, 'Well, your bulls are good bulls, but they're too high priced.' I said, 'Well, I have seed corn out here in my bin I'll sell you for \$3.' He said, 'Oh yeah, but I don't know what it will produce.' I told him, 'You don't know what that \$500-\$600 bull will produce either.'"

"We're trying to sell something that has some genetics in it and performance behind it—years of performance—so that there's something predictable. A man's foolish to buy anything unless he knows what's behind it. . . . DeKalb sells me seed corn; Pioneer



*Predictability is what the DBCS program is all about. The female side of the herd has been closed for 15 years and these replacement heifers, like every cow in Grace's herd, show at least three generations of DBCS breeding on the bottom side of their pedigrees.*

Fertility and performance mean little, however, if conformation standards can't be met. "Conformation," says Grace, "is just about three things. We want them structurally sound—that's the main thing. We want lots of red meat and then we want them big enough to keep growing after they come off test."

Because of emphasis on conformation, Grace would not buy a bull sight unseen. On top of that, he wants to know what the bull's dam looks like. Why? Udders. "You can foul up more udders in a cow herd quicker by using the wrong bull than any other way. So I want to see the mama. If she has a good udder, then I'll use the bull."

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#### **Must Like What You See**

But there's still more to eye appeal. Although performance is uppermost in Grace's mind, he says, "You have to like what you see. Who in the world would go out and babysit with a cow all night in a snowstorm if they didn't like it? There's really not enough money in it, so you have to like it."

It's obvious Grace likes the business and likes what he sees. He has, by the way, seen about 60% of his calves born. But then that's not surprising when he and only two other men do all the work—take care of the cattle, farm 800 acres and feed out about 3,000 feeder pigs each year.

On top of that, Grace keeps all his records. By choice. "Let's face it," he says. "I enjoy it. And I've seen results from it. Here's how I approach it when I try to sell somebody on using performance. I tell them first, it's a have-to case because you shave enough right off the top when you get rid of your poor producing cows to pay for your time."

"But second, if you do it for a year or two you'll get so engrossed that you'll never give it up, especially if you really want a good herd of cows."

There's good reason for that philosophy, Grace feels. "You can't go out and buy a good herd of cows. Going out and doing that is like going out and buying a diamond in the rough that somebody walked over for 10 years. That's impossible and you just don't do it. And you don't find good herds unless it's a dispersal and then there's lots of people after them. You build a good herd of cows and the only way you can do that is to have information on them."

#### **Management Makes a Difference**

Grace believes you also gear management to your performance program. That's why creep feeding is part of his program. "We creep feed them every year so we'll have more consistent weights," he explains, "and

we think our weaning weights are a more valuable selection tool because we have more or less the same environment each year for the calves. For example, if they don't have quite as much grass one year, they have a little extra feed on the side."

Because the creep is only intended to compensate for environmental differences from year to year, it is not a hot ration—32-34% TDN, 14% protein.

Heifers, after weaning, are pasture-raised. Bulls undergo an on-the-farm feed test using corn silage. "We like to feed them just like we think the commercial cattleman's going to feed their offspring," Grace says. "We want cattle that will do well on homegrown feed."

Most of the bulls, by the way, do sell to commercial breeders, many of them repeat customers. The top 10-20%, however, often find their way into registered herds. And regardless of where they go, they pass on pounds. One customer, for example, found that 60 calves by a Grace bull outweighed 60 herd mates by an average of 101 lb. as yearlings.

#### **Make Money, Improve Herd**

"Our whole goal," Grace explains, "is to sell cattle that will first make somebody else some money and second, improve his herd. If we can do that, we've succeeded. Now if we can do that long enough, we're going to make money out of it."

"We pull the bottom end of our bulls off and they go straight to slaughter. The next cut are sold to commercial buyers and last year they weighed 1,050 lb. at a year and were 5-frame or better. So the bottom bull we sell today is better than our top bull was when we started."

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And today's top bull? He goes back to work in his home herd, along with the likes of Eileenmere Masterpiece JAO, Nichols Benchmark J32 and Corvallis Poundmaker 36 '73, those sires who (along with three others, home-grown) were responsible for the calves boasting the figures listed in that first ANGUS JOURNAL ad.

And this spring's calf crop was sired by bulls weighing at least 1,200 lb. at a year, with frame scores of six or better—like PS Power Play, GK Shoshone 123K, and home-bred bulls DBCS Masterpiece M224, DBCS Masterpiece M198, DBCS Benchmark M203 and DBCS Rito 203 M185.

It's no wonder the average weaning weights of Grace's calves (both bulls and heifers) have increased from 398 lb. the first year to 624 lb. last fall. It's predictable performance. 