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Too much of a good thing?

Has the Angus breed become too focused on terminal traits? It is a fair question that I get asked occasionally and one that deserves consideration as we look to the future.

When we think of terminal traits, we typically think of growth and carcass merit. These traits are relatively easy to measure and highly heritable, allowing us to develop expected progeny differences (EPDs) and make significant directional change as breeders have applied selection pressure. That is not to say that we can't also make directional change in maternal traits of interest, like heifer pregnancy and sustained fertility or longevity. Contrary to most terminal traits, however, these are harder to measure, lowly heritable and the toolbox to make change just isn't as full, for now.

Traditional Angus breeders probably don't like to think of Angus as being terminal, but it's important to acknowledge that Angus has been successfully used as the terminal breed of choice in many commercial programs for years; a great example would be Brahman-based outfits in the south. In addition, the breed's combination of calving ease, growth and carcass merit have supported the use of registered Angus genetics in beef-on-dairy programs and now make up more than 60% of the beef semen sold into those systems.

Also, over the last couple of years, there has been significant demand for registered Angus bulls for the export

semen market. In 2020 the market grew by 33% with 6.1 million units of Angus semen exported, a good portion of that to Brazil. Here again, Angus is used as a terminal breed to be mated to their Nelore cows to improve growth and carcass merit.

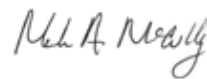
The combination of the beef-on-dairy and export semen markets has been tremendous for registered Angus bull demand. Many sale-toppers have been purchased for those markets. Those high prices, logically, are heavily influenced by terminal traits.

Diversity in the breed

Just reading sale reports can give the impression that the breed has become terminal or that terminal traits are all that should be considered. That conclusion can be dangerously misleading to the registered breeder. For me, the bigger concern is for the average commercial producer attending those sales. When terminally oriented bulls top the sale, it would be logical for the cow-calf producer to think he needs the same genetic package. For them, maximizing growth and carcass merit might not be the solution given their environment, marketing program and overall breeding objectives.

In the end I think a tremendous advantage of the Angus breed is our diversity. We have the largest breed registry in the United States, with the largest single-breed database behind it. We have registered Angus breeders with different philosophies operating in every environment in this great country. This tremendous diversity gives us a competitive advantage that no other breed can match. There are registered Angus genetics that excel in terminal traits and maternal traits, and ones that balance both.

While over recent years we have been able to build powerful tools to make more directional change in growth and carcass merit, we are working hard to build equally powerful tools for maternal traits, too. With these tools in hand, I am excited to watch how registered Angus seedstock breeders will continue to meet both the terminal and maternal needs of the commercial customer. **AJ**



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