

Honored in Oklahoma



By Alan Newport
OSU Ag Information

Tom and Bob Drake.

For the first time in seven years, Oklahoma State University's animal science department has named a Master Breeder of livestock.

Actually there are two—Bob and Tom Drake, owners of Drake Farms Angus operation at Davis, Okla.

The joint award was presented to the Drakes at the annual animal science department banquet in Stillwater, April 9. OSU has only named 13 Master Breeders.

Recognition came to the Drakes because they've done what every purebred producer should do—produce market animals, says Bob Totusek, animal science department head.

"They've made their impact through the use of performance records to improve their herd and the Angus breed," Totusek says.

In short, Bob and Tom Drake exercised some old-fashioned foresight. They recognized what the beef industry needed and took their breeding program in that direction.

It's paid off. Their bulls are highly sought after by commercial producers who Tom says constitute 95 percent of bull buyers. Drake bulls consistently sell among the top animals in tested bull sales at the Oklahoma BEEF Inc. test station near Stillwater. They average \$1,600-1,700 each in sales at Drake Farms. Four Drake bulls have gone on contract as studs with national breeding services. And the brothers continue performance-testing their bulls at Oklahoma BEEF Inc. and on their farm.

Bulls are the focus

Heifers from their 200-cow commercial herd are hot enough that the Drakes can sell as replacements nearly everything they produce. Their purebred females sell almost evenly to purebred and commercial producers.

"We produce bulls for the commercial industry," Tom says flatly. "It's taken 20-some-odd years to build the bull market we have, and we don't intend to lose it.

"Our breed, the Angus breed, is concerned about milk traits, calving ease traits, and as much growth as you can get without putting the other two out of balance."

In that vein, about four years ago the brothers started using bulls with high EPD for weaning weight and mothering ability. Tom calls it the most important change they've made in recent years.

"It appears to me the commercial industry's ahead of the purebred industry on using EPD," he says. "We've had a lot of commercial people come in here and ask for EPD information, but I don't believe we've had one purebred producer ask for it."

Drake bulls now sell at the farm according to EPD rating. Their old system of price by yearling weight has fallen by the wayside.

There was a time the Drakes tried the "show steer" approach of height at all costs, as did many others. But they soon backed away never forgetting the mothering ability, Bob says.



EPD, then carcass traits

Drakes also began carcass testing their steer calves two years ago, realizing the importance the industry would soon place on carcass value.

They were eventually able to achieve nearly 100 percent Choice grade from their steers sent to the feedlot. That puts another desirable trait on their bill of goods and moves them one step closer to the "optimum animal".

The optimum animal the brothers want to produce would have the right size, plenty of lean and not too much fat, rapid growth, good milk production, mothering ability, and a thriftiness on pasture.

Does that animal exist? The Drakes think the ingredients are in the Angus breed they have had such success with.

Bob explains: "I think within the Angus breed there's a considerable difference between bloodlines, and we feel like once you find those bloodlines, if you can mate them with others, then you can produce the animal we're talking about."

The Drake brothers intend to find those bloodlines and develop them through the use of artificial insemination. A.I. is an integral part of the day-to-day operation.

How it all comes together

Essentially, their farm profile looks like this:

They keep a purebred cow herd of 600 animals and a

commercial herd of 200. They use A.I. on most cows and heifers the first breeding, then follow with cleanup bulls. Estrous synchronization is the norm.

The commercial herd serves as a testing ground for bulls they breed their cows to and those they produce. The 200 commercial cows are used to check carcass traits and growth performance. Every calf is identified by its sire, and all 800 cows have life histories recorded in the office.

Calving season on Drake Farms runs October through May, mostly March and April. Heifers calve the first time at 24 or 31 months, but usually in the spring.

The brothers have split farm management so Tom deals mainly with the purebred herd and Bob handles the commercial herd plus 4,800 acres of farmland and pasture. Together, they discuss options and then make decisions.

It apparently works. And both have allowed time for leadership roles in the cattle industry besides operating their farm. Tom is on the board of directors of the American Angus Assn., and Bob is actively serving his term as president of the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Assn.

As busy and successful as these men are, they consider OSU's Master Breeder award as a special affirmation.

"It's quite an honor," Bob says. "It was totally unexpected. We're very pleased and we're very surprised."

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