



The McCulloh family relaxes at Woodhill Farms (from left) Lori, Mutt, Allison and Brian. Not pictured is the oldest child, Ryan.

BACK TO THE BASICS

Some call Brian McCulloh a conservative cattleman. In this day of tough economics and even tougher competition, however, he prefers being known as a fundamentally sound breeder.

BY CINDY FOLCK

Back to the basics is a phrase we hear in politics, education and even cooking. It indicates a starting point — going back to the fundamentals.

Do basics also apply to the beef industry? Brian McCulloh certainly thinks so. He's out to prove it as managing partner of Woodhill Farms.

This farm, nestled in the rolling hills of western Wisconsin, near Viroqua, produced 115 registered Angus calves from its cow herd this spring. It also maintains a small, commercial beef herd in addition to raising hay and corn.

McCulloh joined Woodhill Farms in March 1984. The owners, Dr. Daniel and Anne Borgen, had a small Angus herd they wanted to expand and hired this young but experienced cattleman to assist them. McCulloh's first steps were to set long-term goals and start with the basics. He purchased mainly commercial beef cows to begin building cattle numbers. Later, he con-

Brian McCulloh checks out a group of Woodhill Farms bulls that are ready to be shipped to their new owners.

centrated on improving fences, pastures and other facilities.

"I wanted to get a feel for the farm and pastures," he says. "I was fairly conservative on building up the farm. It needed to be a viable operation so there would be a future for the Borgens and my family."

After becoming comfortable with Woodhill's progress, McCulloh next began using artificial insemination on the registered herd and keeping replacement heifers to build up the herd. "Again, we put emphasis on the basics — using only proven AI sires," McCulloh says.

And they've stayed with those basics as the herd has grown. The farm has reached a point where the registered herd is larger than the commercial herd and they're phasing the latter out.

McCulloh is not a stranger to the purebred Angus business. Although he was raised on a hog and beef farm near Dewitt, Iowa, during college he was a summer intern for the American Angus Association. He worked mainly with the regional managers and learned a great deal about the Angus business.

"I was able to see the country and it opened up a new vision of the Angus breed for me," he says of the intern experience.

After graduating from Iowa State University in 1981, McCulloh and his wife, Lori, moved to Blacksburg, Va., where he was hired as assistant coach of the Virginia Polytechnical Institute livestock judging team. He coached the team for two years before joining the American Angus Association staff again, this time as director of junior activities.

McCulloh enjoyed his work with the Association and strived to learn even more about the Angus business. The best part was working with the people and promoting the Angus breed. However, he was very interested when the opportunity at Woodhill Farms came up and decided to move on.

"Public relations work is great, but I was anxious to be involved in the hands-



on part of the industry," he says. He and Lori had a young family at the time and his extensive traveling was hard on them.

The family adjusted well to the Wisconsin move. Brian and Lori now have three children — Ryan, 10; Matt, 8; and Allison, 6. And just as the McCulloh family has grown, so has Brian's Angus industry experiences.

McCulloh just returned in May from a trip to New Zealand. He was invited for a tour by New Zealand Angus breeders who had purchased AI semen from a Woodhill bull. McCulloh says it was a wonderful opportunity to meet breeders there and see their Angus operations firsthand.

Woodhill Farms' main market for bulls is a little closer to home— southwest Wisconsin and northeast Iowa. Marketing is a challenge to McCulloh in the immediate area around the farm, as farmers are more interested in dairy cattle than beef. To remedy that problem, Woodhill is expanding its market area to other states, such as Wyoming, Nebraska and Kansas. This is a result of contacts McCulloh has made while exhibiting cattle at the National Western Stock Show in Denver.

Customers — new or repeat — are important to McCulloh. He's always ready to take time to talk to customers and meet their needs. "I always stop what I'm doing and show visitors around," he says. "I've had one gentleman who has stopped seven or eight times, just to visit."

Another marketing tool for Woodhill Farms is a production bull sale, held annually in April. Performance testing is em-

phasized in their bull program. In 1988 and 1989 Woodhill bulls were consigned to the Central Test Station in Platteville, Wis. Woodhill Farms had the top indexing sire group both years.

"We used the test station to gain credibility for our on-farm testing," McCulloh says.

In evaluating Woodhill's breeding program, McCulloh again stresses that basics are important. "We select for sound cows that breed back in 60 days, calve without assistance and have good udders," he says. "We also breed for a good, uniform set of offspring that perform."

McCulloh relates that the best education he's had in the basics of livestock breeding came from his parents, Winton and Cleone McCulloh, on their hog farm. While in high school Brian learned a lesson that, to this day, he hasn't forgotten.

"My brother and I showed market barrows and won regularly, so we told Dad we were going to pick out a boar to sire our future market barrows," he says. "We chose a beautiful Hampshire boar that was long, lean and large framed. We chose him purely on phenotype. However, because of the short generation interval in hog breeding, it didn't take long for our mistake to show. The boar wasn't sound, he didn't settle gilts, and his daughters were terrible in the farrowing house."

This lesson taught McCulloh the importance of soundness, reproductive traits, fast efficient growth and paying attention to the basics while selecting breeding stock.

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Uniform cattle are above average.*

— Brian McCulloh

"It was good Dad allowed us to make that mistake," he says. "If you let kids make their own decisions, they build their own self-confidence and learn from their own mistakes."

McCulloh encourages more parents to allow children to make decisions on the farm, to help spark an interest in production agriculture.

Back-to-the-basics management helped Woodhill Farms get started, but McCulloh also believes good timing played a part in their success.

"When we started in the purebred business, people were beginning to look at multi-trait selection rather than single trait," he explains. "That encourages a move toward uniformity."

To breed for uniformity, McCulloh limits the number of bulls used in the AI herd. "I want a breeder to walk into a pen of Woodhill bulls and have a list of 10 good bulls to decide on, rather than only one standout."

Doing their homework and using sound logic to select cattle has become a little easier with the advent of expected progeny differences (EPDs). "We use EPDs as a measuring tool to determine the bull's genetic traits," McCulloh says. "My perfect cow's EPDs would be 3 pounds or less for birth weight, 40 pounds for yearling weight, and 10 pounds for milk. I want my cows to do many things right. The commercial producer is looking for cows that can take care of themselves."

Maternal traits are emphasized because Angus excel in them, along with carcass traits, and commercial producers recognize this.

McCulloh cautions breeders, especially new breeders, not to confuse moderation with mediocrity. "Uniform cattle are above average. The best one is the most predictable one," he says.

His best advice for new breeders is to first define exactly what their goal is.

Breeders need a defined plan that evaluates their financial resources. After determining resources and expenses the herd will accrue during the year, you can determine the needed revenue from the herd.

"Basically, you need to work backwards, on paper, from where you want to be at the end of the year," he says. "Then we all should continue to honestly evaluate our own cattle. Basically, we need to be a student of the business."

McCulloh doesn't encourage breeders to pawn off their bad cattle to other producers. "We only cut our own throat by selling mistakes," he says. "The customer may not buy from you again, and he may not buy Angus cattle ever again."

McCulloh says he's made mistakes and will continue to make mistakes, but the important thing is to learn from them. Sooner or later, especially if you stick to the basics, you'll see positive results.

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