



JULIE GRIMES ALBERTSON PHOTOS

Angus family portrait -Steve Hillman, his wife Cheryl and daughter Bethany.

BRECHER, ANGUS FARM *One-Stop EPD Shopping*

by Julie Grimes Albertson

Steve Hillman would tell you that they do at Brecher Angus Farm, Gorgeville, Ill. is pretty simple — sell 25 to 30 bulls to the same commercial producers. What's not so simple is why those cattlemen keep coming back —in a word, consistency.

For more than 30 years the objective of Hillman and his uncle and founding-partner, Homer Brecher, has never changed. "We've built a line of customers because we stress keeping people happy by giving them what they want," says Hillman.

What their buyers want are bulls that work. "My customers are a lot of big-time grain farmers who have 20 to 30 cows, and they don't have time to deal with calving problems," says Hillman.

For that reason calving ease is one of their main selection priorities. They weigh all their calves at birth and don't keep any bull calf that weighs more than 100 pounds.

Hillman says it's not too difficult for them to maintain high standards for calving ease as long as they use proven sires. "Some people might get off the track by using young unproven bulls. We use bulls with 80 to 90 percent accuracies."

Consistency in sires breeds consistency in the cow herd. One way the herd has maintained that consistency is the top females are never sold. Hillman culls 10 cows each year while keeping the 10 best heifers. We expect our cows to calve and rebreed in 60 days or they're gone," Hillman says.

Producing reproductively sound females has been a goal at Brecher Angus. The herd's 88 percent artificial insemination (AI)

first conception rate has proven to Hillman that vigilant culling makes a great difference.

Another reason for the high AI conception rate is the physical structure of the farm itself. A renovated dairy operation, the farm boasts enough barn space to house all of its 60 head through winter and spring. We probably have one of the best setups in Illinois because we can calve successfully even at 30 degrees below zero." It can often be bitterly cold when they calve because December, January and February are their calving months. However, with good ventilation and changing the bedding once a week, Hillman believes their operation is perfect for producing commercial bulls, and that's what pays the bills.

The cow herd stays on concrete until the end of May, which gives Hillman a chance to AI all the cows and to rebreed any that aren't pregnant. We baby our cows while they're up. We give them silage, all the hay they can eat and minerals."

Their facility also aids greatly in heat detection of their cows. We don't farm big — our cows are our living," says Hillman. "I check heats four to five times a day. I say if you're around your cows you don't have a problem." Hillman adds that's why some people may have a hard time breeding artificially on pasture, the cows don't show strong enough heats.

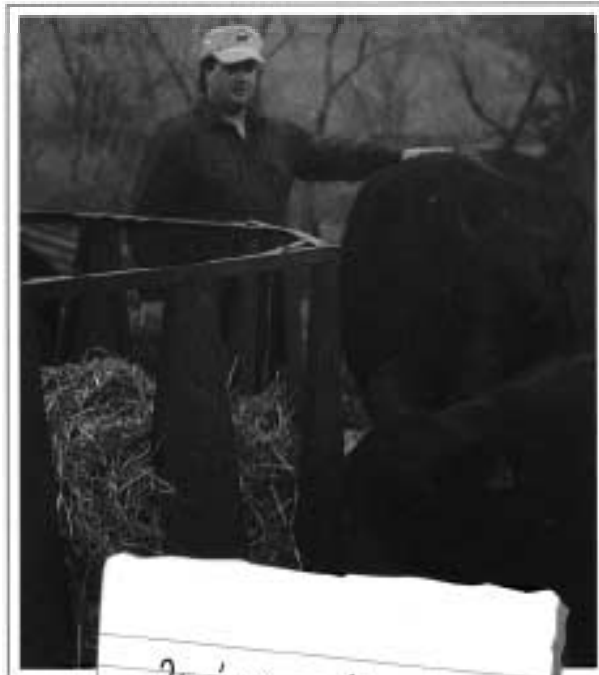
"I also think people breed cows too early. If I see a cow in heat this morning, I'll wait until the next morning to breed her." 90thinks people get in a hurry breeding artificially when cows are too hot.

"Anybody can AI a cow. It's catching them in heat at the right time that makes the difference."

Along with an AI program, Hillman has been using embryo transfer for the past three years to try and capitalize on the strong expected progeny differences (EPDs) and genetic traits of his best producers. "Embryo transfer has become affordable for us," he says.

Both bulls and heifers are valuable enough to their commercial and purebred producers that it has been cost effective to use the technology.

Another tool Hillman uses to produce



We've got a line of customers built up because we stress keeping people happy by giving them what they want.

valuable bulls is carcass data. "We have a buyer that gives us all group carcass information on the steers and heifers he buys from us as well as a high premium for them because they gain faster."

However, while Hillman has been willing to use technology to better his herd, he resisted using popular AI sires that produced extreme progeny. "My uncle and I never swayed on size. When frame size went extreme we stayed right in the middle. Our cows are big enough at 1,400 to 1,500 pounds."

Their reluctance to change with the times has paid off, as the trend is moving back to moderate framed cattle. We were never show-minded. We were just doing our own thing out here; nobody really cared about what we were doing. The last three years we've been successful because

of the numbers. EPD people like us are popular again."

EPDs play an integral role in the Brecher operation. Hillman, however, has noticed that while younger customers are interested in the numbers, some of his older customers still rely on eyesight and cowboy intuition to select the right bull. "They buy cattle on structural correctness and eye appeal, as well as looking at weaning and yearling weights."

A university Extension agent weighs all Brecher Angus calves at weaning and yearling, so if they have a really good calf people can trust the numbers.

Whatever they use to select bulls at Brecher Angus Farms, the bottom line is they keep coming back. Homer Brecher has performance tested the herd for 30 years and Hillman is convinced it has made a difference.

Evidence of that difference is seen at the Illinois Beef Expo, which has been Brecher Angus Farm's greatest advertisement year after year. This year was no exception as they consigned the top-selling bull. "That sale has really put us over the top on bulls," says Hillman.

Brecher Angus Farm's reputation has spread outside of Illinois. They now have customers in Montana, Oklahoma, Nebraska and Ontario, Canada.

Hillman credits much of the farm's success to his uncle. "In the early days Homer had to choose between producing for the commercial producer or for the show ring. He chose the commercial producer.

As Homer began assembling his herd in 1962, he bought Angus heifers at dispersion sales for a base and then bought the top-selling bull at the Illinois Futurity sale.

After Hillman graduated from college in 1988, Brecher handed over the day-to-day responsibilities of managing the cow herd to his nephew. There was no risk involved in that transaction; Brecher had spent more than 20 years preparing Hillman for the task.

That's why for the past 30 years bull buyers have kept coming back for Brecher bulls. No matter who's running the farm, the product remains consistent... consistently good.

AJ