

A Lifelong Learning Experience

BY DAVID K. DANCIGER

LIFE AS A CATTLE BREEDER IS ONE LONG SERIES OF EDUCATIONAL EPISODES. ONLY AFTER YEARS IN THE BUSINESS CAN YOU LOOK BACK IN RETROSPECT, SEE THE PATTERN, RECOGNIZE TRUE MENTORS, AND UNDERSTAND WHERE THE PATH HAS LED.

After finishing my tour of duty in World War II as a pilot of a B17 Hying Fortress, I returned to Harvard University to complete the education I'd started some 30 months earlier. Fortunately, I had the GI Bill to pay the tuition. In those days I believe it cost about \$500 per semester. With a degree in economics I returned home to Fort Worth.

I had always wanted to own a piece of land, and this was a good time to buy. After looking in five states — Oklahoma, Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana and Kansas — for more than six months, I came to the conclusion I wanted a

ranch on a major highway near a big city. I found the property in Texas, 22 miles south of the Dallas County Courthouse. It was 2,000 acres in a good location with an owner who had to sell or lose his business in town.

A good friend and a man who had worked for my father for 30 years was to be the ranch manager. Neither of us knew much about cows, ranching or farming. I had never lived anywhere but in town. "Dutch," my friend's name, had owned a few Tennessee Walking horses. He had done quite a bit of truck driving and had passed through a lot of land and kind of knew what looked good to him.

At this point, I felt the need for some kind of information about cattle. I heard about a short lecture course on beef cattle at Oklahoma A&M College at Stillwater and decided it might be a good thing to attend. While I was there, I purchased most of the

books a beef science student would use. One of the books was about all the beef breeds. Another was Morrison's Feeds and Feeding. There were several others. In reading these books I discovered Angus had won more carcass contests than any other breed.

The die was cast. I purchased a herd of commercial Angus cows from a Dr. Shelton in Miami, Okla. This is where I had another one of those learning experiences. A few weeks into owning this herd I discovered my cows had Bangs. The cure to my ignorance was a big "B" branded on the jaw of each cow. They all went to slaughter; I went to the cleaners.

After a short recuperation period I found a registered Angus herd owned by a man who wanted to sell his cattle and land and retire. I purchased his 55 cows and a bull. After a few months I noticed the bull seemed to be suffering from a too active sex life. The same cows were returning to heat after a quiet 60 to 90 days. The young veterinarian I employed was called. He treated almost every single cow for some kind of a fertility problem. The vet bill for three months work was a shocker.

Another learning experience was in the offing. I started looking for a more experienced vet. I found him. I had already learned that extensive records had to be kept on registered cows. A 5x8-inch card on every cow was kept and I recorded

everything that happened to them. My new vet, Dr. I.B. Nye, studied my cards for about 10 minutes. He looked up and said, "I think I know what you have, but let's take some samples and confirm a case of trichomoniasis.

I wasn't exactly sure how serious this was. At least it wasn't Bangs again. I asked, "what do we do now?" after he had, indeed, confirmed his diagnosis. I could tell right away this was going to be another learning experience.

Dr. Nye advised me to buy a virgin bull and breed all my cows by artificial insemination (AI) until every one has a normal term calf. He took me to Dr. Easley, a veterinarian friend of his at the Turner Ranch in Oklahoma. Dr. Easley had been collecting from about 15 young Hereford bulls twice a week and AI breeding 1,000 registered cows. After we watched his collecting technique, Dr. Easley took us to his small laboratory to show how he examined, diluted and treated the semen to preserve it until breeding time. I took notes on everything, because I knew I was going to have to follow in his footsteps. Everything worked when I go home and it only took two years to straighten out this mess.

Needless to say, I haven't repeated these same mistakes. It became clear to me that there might be some alternatives to the learning experience method. I started attending meetings at Texas A&M University, became familiar with many of the



animal science professors, and found help there.

Since starting the Tybar herd in Colorado in 1980, I've avoided the learning experience method of doing things whenever possible. It never ceases to amaze me how much help a cattle breeder can receive if you realize you need help and ask for it in the right places. I could write a long list of my benefactors, and am continuing to add to the list.

Those who persist in using the learning experience method may find themselves lost in the dust, unless they've found a new and better mad not yet discovered by most cattle producers.

I call the new method the "get help" method. Your breed association, university animal science department, Extension Service, and fellow breeders are all well prepared to give, free of charge, information on almost any cow problem you have.

Animal scientists and geneticists have worked for the last 40 years or more to devise methods to aid cattle breeders with their efforts to breed the kind of beef animal they want for their particular environment or purposes. This has been a most difficult task. Even the best judges in the land could not predict the performance of a cow or bull from their visual appraisals. Even weighing countless progeny from excellent looking bulls and manipulating the data in every conceivable way did not work with any real consistency to make progress a reality.

It was expected progeny differences (EPDs) and the computer that made a difference. Real progress toward planned goals are now absolutely assured. All data collected by breed associations can be put to good use by both scientist and cattle breeder.



Steady Progress

We're making rapid progress in breeding a cow herd that will produce a useful set of bulls for the commercial producer. A producer can visit our ranch and purchase 25 or more bulls which have a uniform set of EPDs. This ensures a highly uniform set of progeny with dependable performance, providing there is some uniformity in the set of cows being serviced.

We want to provide a source for low birth weight EPD bulls which have the highest weaning weight EPD possible and with a reasonable (+4 to 13 lb.) milk EPD. After studying the research presented in the Beef Improvement Federation's 1993 proceedings book (see sidebar story on page 118), we plan to provide bulls with a mid-40s to low 60s yearling weight EPD.

Other favorable traits will be increased as much as possible after the above requirements are met. This includes making greater use of the important marbling EPD. Mom and more AI sires are available with high marbling and reasonable birth weight

"Our credo is simplicity itself – go for excellence. Of course, this involves every phase of the ranching operation. Absolute honesty is a big part of this, and sometimes knowledge of the truth is hard to come by."

– David & Emma Danciger

EPDs. We started this program two years ago and will continue to make steady progress.

A small percentage of sires in the American Angus Association's Sire Evaluation Report have the combination of above average growth and below average birth weight. We're doing our best to provide "heifer bulls," and at the same time, provide female replacements for our herd which will not become too large as mature cows. We use these sires after we get good reports on them from other breeders, or people knowledgeable in the Angus business. It's entirely possible to have low birth weight, high weaning and high yearling weights. It's difficult to do without careful matchmaking and culling.

Our program to lower our Pulmonary Arterial Pressure (PAP) scores is succeeding. The PAP score measures cattle's susceptibility to brisket disease or high-altitude sickness. The PAP EPDs for our herd are provided by Colorado State University's animal science department. Our most sincere thanks to

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IDEAS INTO ACTION

The Beef Improvement Federation's 1993 proceedings book from its 25th anniversary meeting, is a wonderful source of information for all interested in beef cattle. The following are quotes, excerpts, and paraphrases of papers presented at that meeting that David Danciger believes in and would like to share with fellow breeders.

The Effects of Environment on Calf Birth Weight & Birth Weight EPD

Birth weight and birth weight EPD have increased dramatically during the last two decades. Many in the cattle industry would conclude that this increase has occurred because of the increased emphasis placed upon growth genetics. However, all growth traits have two major components — genetics and environment. In most cases, environment is a major player, albeit it's not a permanent effect.

Impact of Milk EPD

Milk produced by beef cows is a high-energy, high protein nutrient source. The average milk composition of beef cattle is 4.1 percent fat, 3.3 percent protein and 12 percent dry matter. When compared to grain or protein supplements on a dry matter basis, milk provides more energy than corn or soybean meal and the protein content ranks between the two dry feeds. The consistently strong, positive relationship between milk production and calf weaning weight indicates that milk production is the single greatest factor influencing pre-weaning gain.

Milk producing potential (measured by machine milking) decreases until the calf is capable of consuming all the milk produced by the dam (weigh-suckle-weight). It follows that the cow's maximum milk production is controlled by the intake of the calf early in lactation and that few beef cows produce milk to their maximum genetic potential.

The validity of milk EPD has been proven by performing experiments that compared actual performance and the performance predicted by breeding values (EPDs). These experiments were performed to bolster the confidence of the users of milk EPD. The effectiveness of milk EPD also has been proven by the genetic trend data, which is based on hundreds of thousands of performance records.

Size Wize

Increased outputs, whether they be due to increased growth or increased milk production, don't ensure increased biological or economic efficiency. Therefore, it's important to understand how selection for increased growth and the potential for increased frame and mature size can impact a management program.

Maintenance costs, which are a function of mature weight, account for 50 to 60 percent of the total cost in a cow-calf operation. Selection decisions which increase mature size have a significant impact on feed requirements. Birth, weaning and yearling weights are all highly correlated with mature weight. Yearling and mature hip heights are also highly correlated with mature weight. As you select for increases in any of these correlated traits, you're likely to get increases in mature cow weight and maintenance costs.

Additional feed costs have to be made up through additional calf growth or increased selling price per pound. If cows are very high milking, increases may have to be made in both quantity and quality of feed to meet the higher nutritional demands.

Other factors that must be kept in mind are:

1. Weight at puberty is a function of mature size. As mature size increases, the weight and date for a heifer to begin cycling also increase.
2. When feed resources are restricted, larger-framed cattle are more susceptible to decreases in reproductive performance.

Experience

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professors James Brinks and Richard Bourdon, and graduate student Mark Enns for their help.

What We Need

Many knowledgeable people are now saying, what we need an efficient cattle. Has size become irrelevant? We (the beef industry) are competing with tiny animals. Most fish and fowl are not much bigger than a few big bites on your dinner plate. People rarely carry home from the supermarket more than 3 pounds of meat of any kind. Big in cattle may be beautiful, but this particular "beauty" cannot be marketed in a package of meat, and so is not real important.

It's price, tenderness and flavor that are important. What I read in the cattle press is that we need optimum sized cows, which is another way of saying efficient cows. We need cows which produce a calf at the age of two and continue to do so each year until they can be replaced with an even more productive cow.

I ask for and receive a lot of wonderful help from Colorado State University animal science department; American Angus Association personnel, John Crouch, in particular; many absolutely wonderful fellow breeders who have helped me make intelligent choices; Tybar ranch manager Mark Nieslanik; my wife, Emma; and veterinarians Tim Holt of Gunnison and Douglas Coffman of Glenwood springs.

I've been through the mill in the cattle business for 28 years and am still engaged in learning every day. Self education can be an expensive and painful experience. If I can help you, my number is (303) 963-1391, day or night.