



# Never Too Late for a Fresh Start

Ninety-year-old Ralph Best is reaping the rewards of 20 years of structured herd improvements.

STORY & PHOTOS BY BECKY MILLS

**A**t 69, most producers are thinking about retirement or at least slowing down. Not Ralph Best. In 1979, when Monroe County, Tenn., Extension agent Earl Law approached Best about signing on for a 10-year cattle and forage demonstration project, he was all for it.

"I started late," concedes the Tellico Plains producer and retired schoolteacher, "but it was something I had always wanted to do."

As they started the demonstration project, Best told Law he felt like he was "starting over in kindergarten," even though he had lived on the operation all his life and had assumed sole responsibility in 1948 when his father died. With assistance from Bob Sliger, who followed Law as county agent, and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), who co-sponsored the project with the Extension service, it now looks like Best is working on his master's degree, especially when his calves walk through the auction ring.

Actually, Best was chosen for the demonstration project because his operation was average.

"He was an average-sized producer who was doing a lot of things like the average producer," Sliger recalls. But Best was interested in making changes.

"If you practice repetition without trying to do better, you don't go anywhere," Best says.

## Initial improvements

First on the list was getting his 24-cow herd into a controlled breeding season. "That has been the single most beneficial practice," Best says. "Sliger didn't have to argue me into that one."

Now, rather than staying with the cows year-round, the bulls are turned with the herd on Feb. 1 and stay with the herd for approximately 60 days. After more than 20 years of a controlled breeding season, 95% of the calves are born in the first 45 days of the calving season.

That doesn't surprise University of Minnesota animal scientist Cliff Lamb. "In my opinion, that is the biggest advantage of a controlled breeding season. Cows tend to cycle a lot better, and you gradually improve and shorten the calving season."

Since the calves are born in a concentrated period, Best can track them better. His cows are protective of their newborns, so he doesn't tag them at birth. He does write down the cow's number, the date she calves and the sex of the calf. During spring processing, the calves are matched with their dams and tagged.

## Improving herd health

Since the calves are close in age and the cows are in the same stage of pregnancy, Best, a beef quality assurance (BQA)-certified producer, has been able to improve his herd health program.

In the spring, the cows are vaccinated to protect against pinkeye, vibriosis (vibrio) and five strains of leptospirosis (lepto). In the fall, they get another five-way lepto and vibrio vaccination and a four-way respiratory booster. Four

weeks before calving, cows are vaccinated for blackleg and scours and treated for grubs.

"We hope to improve the quality of their colostrum and get the calves off to a running start," Sliger explains.

Early in life, the male calves are castrated and implanted, and all calves are vaccinated against infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), parainfluenza-3 (PI<sub>3</sub>), blackleg and pinkeye. They're also dewormed.

In the summer, the calves are worked twice. In keeping with the requirements for the Smoky Mountain Feeder Calf Association/Southeast Pride Plus sale, the first working is 118 days before the fall sale. The two workings also ready the replacement heifers for a development program.

### Genetic role

After the controlled breeding and health programs, genetics takes a huge share of the credit for the improvement in Best's operation.

Sliger estimates heifer weaning weights averaged 425-450 pounds (lb.) in 1979, while the steers barely topped 500 lb. Since then weights have not been estimates. Best has kept complete performance records. Last year four steer calves straight off the cows weighed 800 lb. or more. Eight replacement heifers averaged 703 lb., and the steers off the mature cows averaged 756 lb. Like all of Best's calves, they did it without benefit of creep feed.

When the demonstration project started, Best was using Hereford bulls on what Sliger tactfully describes as "native cows." With the help of a bull-leasing program managed by a local bank, he upgraded the quality of his bulls, although he continued to use Herefords.

After watching his cows struggle to calve, he told Sliger it didn't matter how good a dead calf was. He also began to notice black baldie calves were popular at sale time.

In February of 1986, he leased a calving-ease Angus bull. Nothing but Angus bulls have

been with the Best cows since. Through the lease program, and with Sliger's guidance, Best used bulls with pedigrees stacked for maternal traits and performance on generation after generation of his cows.

Thinking back to his predemonstration cow herd, Best says there is no comparison.

"I tell folks the quickest way to add value to a herd of crossbred cows is to use an Angus bull," Sliger says. "He brings uniformity." Sliger and Best also were more than happy to get rid of their dehorning tools.

As for marketability, the buyers at the September 2000 Smoky Mountain Feeder Calf Association sale spoke with their checkbooks. Best's steers, averaging just less than 700 lb., brought \$94.20/hundredweight (cwt.). The steers, weighing more than 700 lb., averaged more than \$88/cwt.

His heifers have a ready home, too. In 1992 Best made the decision to reduce the number of replacements he keeps annually. Sliger asked Morgan Jones, an area producer with a similar program and genetics, if he would like to buy Best's extra heifers. At first, Jones was reluctant, but when one of the first heifers weaned a 700-lb. calf, Jones was convinced. Some years he buys all of Best's replacement heifers.

"He hasn't been hard to sell since," Sliger reports.

TVA withdrew from the demonstration after the first 10 years, but the Tennessee Extension service remained, and the project is ongoing with Best's blessing.

"Don't fix it if it ain't broke," says Best, who is now 90 years old.

"It is a win-win situation," Sliger says. "The last 10 or 12 years show what can be done. We've used this model a number of places."

"Mr. Best isn't doing anything that any other producer couldn't do," he adds.



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## Forages do their part

While Ralph Best and Bob Sliger love to talk cows, forages have been a key part of the demonstration. For starters, soil tests were ordered for every pasture. Next, Best applied agricultural limestone and fertilizer according to those recommendations. He has continued to use this prescription approach for the more than 20 years of the demonstration.

Next he added legumes to the fescue pastures, primarily ladino and red clovers, plus Kobe lespedeza.

He also instituted a rotational grazing program with temporary electric fence, a move that allows him to stockpile fescue pastures for late-fall and early-winter grazing.

In addition, he puts up round-bale hay and stores it in barns to supplement the grazing during late winter or drought.

These changes now allow Best to maintain 36-40 cows on 80 acres of forage.



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