

All the Pieces Fit



When seedstock and commercial producers cooperate using Angus programs, the result is custom-designed genetics that meet herd, feedlot and carcass specifications.

Story & photos by Steve Suther

It doesn't take big numbers to make an effective information system for customers, just a big commitment. Darrel Smith, Atkinson, Neb., draws on his herd of 150 registered Angus cows, along with his brother Neal's 30 head at Walnut, Iowa, and another 30 or so from business partner BM Angus, York, Neb.

This pool held its 19th "Stacked Genetics" bull sale in Atkinson last February, marketing 71 bulls to producers who can become part of a commercial network. More customers are beginning to take advantage of services that continually test the feeding and carcass merit of their Angus genetics.

Network can be a noun that refers to an interconnected system, or it can be a verb that relates to meeting people, exchanging ideas and interacting. For Smith, the lines of distinction blur.

"We feed our cattle along with those of our customers, so I know what the cattle will do, and I make breeding decisions with customer needs in mind," he says. The 500-head Darrel Smith Feedlot became Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) licensed in May.

Neal started the purebred herd in the early 1970s, and Darrel began to convert his commercial herd to a registered one in the mid-80s. With two decades as a vocational agriculture instructor and a dozen more as an ag banker, Neal provided the genetic guidance to get both herds started.

By 1996, Darrel Smith had built the numbers to about 120 cows, half of them registered. That's when his veterinarian, Gary Chace, asked to join ranks. To make room, Smith would sell many of his commercial cows to young neighbor Bryan Rentschler, who had bought a few heifers already and had a new ranch to stock.

When Chace died suddenly last summer, Smith helped Amy Chace with the cattle details, buying some to help start a fall herd and arranging transfers of the rest to her brother Bryan Buss, who was also a veterinarian in York, Neb. Buss and partner Jeff Meradeth operate BM Angus there, and have agreed to continue in the relationship with the Smiths.

Making it work

What makes this network "work"? As their sale title implies, they have concentrated on certain lines, stacking pedigrees for value. Genetic decisions may seem like management by committee, but that's no problem when a program is on the right track. Smith acknowledges the Rishel and Fink seedstock bases in their genetic package, and more recently they added a Woodhill influence.

Rentschler may be the closest commercial link to the purebred network, because he has similar genetics in cows and bulls. "I've worked closely with Darrel while building my Angus-based herd over the last seven years," he says. "Since I'm also using Angus Beef Record Service (BRS), I can track the ongoing progress from my cows all the way through the feedlot and the GeneNet marketing alliance."

Sometimes Rentschler's advice even figures into the seedstock discussion and has convinced the group to try a bull that worked well for him.

"We sit down and come to agreements to keep our genetics the same," Smith says. "Knowing what our customers need, we bought the Woodhill bull together this spring." Like earlier

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Cooperating
to Get Information



► **Top of page:** This year 14 owners fed from five to 39 head each, commingled in two pens of 132 steers and 114 heifers, at Darrel Smith's feedlot. The feedlot is licensed through the Certified Angus Beef LLC Feedlot-Licensing Program. **Above:** "It's been fun to work with Bryan because he wants to go the mile to find out what he's got," Darrel Smith (left) says of commercial customer Bryan Rentschler. With full Angus BRS records and regular profit-loss statements to guide him, Rentschler can see the investments are paying off.

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purchases over the past six years, the yearling will start with a structured sire evaluation.

Smith's experience with progeny testing began that first year with the Chace cattle. "Gary had three steers and a heifer to take to town, but I realized I had a dozen like that myself," he recalls. It was a small start, but CAB carcass data collection coordinator Rod Schoenbine told him that at least it was a start. The progeny testing effort has grown steadily since then, even though ultrasound also plays a key part of the program today.

Much of the progeny testing has been coordinated through CAB and a 300-cow commercial Angus test herd at Marshall & Fenner Farms, Malta Bend, Mo. Naturally, that part of the network was

also a combination of meeting people and doing business: Cow herd manager Brian Marshall and Neal's son Clint Smith were roommates at Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville.

"We bought a couple of heifers from the Smiths while I was in college, and it just progressed from there," Marshall says. "I saw the quality of bulls they buy, so we were interested in having access to those bulls and the reference sires, feeding the progeny here. We get better cattle to feed, and better replacement heifers, culling cows on weaning weight and carcass data."

The last three years of carcass information in the CAB database shows progress from 40% to 45% CAB acceptance with growing

numbers of progeny tested, Marshall reports, including 80 head last year. Formally structured sire evaluation ends this year, but the same information is still available through Darrel's new license as a CAB feedlot partner.

Feeding at home

Interacting with area yards that fed his test steers for a couple of years convinced Smith to try feeding at home. "I fed a small pen for Bryan [Rentschler] four years ago to help him get feedlot and carcass data," Smith says. "Then I thought, why not expand that to all our customers, so I put in the bigger lots and started what we call the 'Carcass Classic.'"

This year 14 owners fed from five to 39 head each, together in two pens of 132 steers and 114 heifers. "They come in for the arrival shots in November, then 21 to 30 days later we implant and weigh again for the starting weight," Smith explains. "We implant at midpoint, then as they are ready we sort and go to market with them. We use ear tags to identify individual calves and owners. Yellow tags are heifers, white tags are steers."

A report from GeneNet shows one Carcass Classic data sheet with 12 owners. "The tag number tells me the owner," Smith says. "You can see these are one person's cattle, but only he and I know the number."

Of course, in this case, he may want others to know. "He did fantastic, Choice YG2s, and a CAB worth \$1,035.89. He did have one Select, but the six calves had an average daily gain (ADG) of 4.85, and they were March calves," Smith says. "I can take that data back to him, and point out they were all out of one sire from our genetics."

"I mix my own in there, too," he says. "I had four, these

three CABs and an Armour Premium. Those are not quite as much marbling as CAB and a dollar back, but it helps. As the seedstock producer, I need to lead the way, so I'm glad they did well," Smith says, grinning. All the steers gained an average of 4.01 pounds (lb.) per day from first implant to sale day, and heifers had a 3.78 lb. ADG.

Smith encourages bull customers to make use of the Classic, and five of this year's 14 owners took him up on that. "The others are taking a look at it," he says. "It's educational and good public relations, too. It leads them to our genetics."

Seeing is believing

Becoming a licensed CAB partner can only help, Smith says. "We should be able to get more people involved in this network, and that will help our marketing efforts." The full-service approach can make believers out of skeptics. "Guys were coming to our sale saying 'carcass cattle' are hard keepers, but our experience says that's an unfounded prejudice," he says.

"We feed for a guy west of town who has about half our genetics. He had the most Selects of any of our customers last year," Smith says, "but when he told me what sires those cows were out of, I knew why. As he sees which cattle had the greatest value through feeding and in the carcass, he may invest in more of our kind."

Rentschler has virtually all Smith genetics now, and enjoys building his herd quality in tandem with the purebred cattle. From the growing use of artificial insemination (AI) to creep-feeding in management-intensive grazing paddocks, Smith says, "Bryan runs his herd like they were seedstock." With full Angus BRS records



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This year, when Rentschler's first 25 steers sold after 161 days on feed, they had a \$248 feed cost per head, allowing \$2 per bushel value for the corn Rentschler grows and delivers to the feedlot. The calves had come in weighing 728 lb. in early November, and they gained 598.6 lb. at a 41¢-per-pound cost of gain. Adding the \$248 to the BRS-calculated calf value, \$873.14 was the in-value average, easy to compare to the market value per carcass. The four Rentschler calves out of those 25 that ended with a loss were all Selects. They were partially offset by three CABs and one Armour Premium.

Rentschler says he has found

“cow families that will always throw Select calves.” After getting data for four years, he is selecting against those families. “I’ve done this long enough to see patterns.”

Smith says, “Anyone who feeds knows more about which ones to cull. You make more progress on overall production ability of your herd than if you just sell feeders.

“It’s been fun to work with Bryan because he wants to go the mile to find out what he’s got,” Smith says. “Some customers don’t care. The day they sell the calves is the last time they want to think about them. They don’t realize whoever buys them has to make money. The buyer who’s keeping track is smiling because he knows where the good ones are and can buy

them without paying the premium.”

Such buyers are welcome to join the Carcass Classic and stabilize relationships with the Smith customers who prefer to sell. Smith will cooperate with any customer who wants information back, and he invites them to participate at Rentschler’s level.

“I can custom design cattle for Bryan now,” he says. “We look at the carcass very closely, but he’s got to have everything else where we want it, including structural correctness.

“Bryan will need bulls next year, and I have to have something better than what he had,” Smith continues. “We know some Angus genetics don’t have the carcass, just growth. He’s satisfied with the gain, so we are working on

improving carcass value while maintaining that feedlot performance.”

Rentschler is waiting for an opportunity to expand, as he recently doubled the size of his ranch to allow for up to 225 cows. But he started at the bottom of the cattle-value cycle with \$500 cows. “I’m culling for quality as I learn more about these cows,” he says. Thanks to Smith’s network of services and his own initiative to chart the course with Angus BRS, Rentschler will soon have the data-backed set of heifers he wants. “But right now, it’s hard to keep a \$600 replacement,” he says.

