NO SPEED LIMITS

BY SUSAN WATERS

Remember 20 years ago when windows were something we opened up on a warm summer day to let in a breeze of fresh air? In 1997, opening up Windows® is more than a method of climate control, but rather how people of all ages, locations and walks of life manage their business, as well as their personal lives.

In 1991, the American Angus Association accepted the challenge to provide breeders with a better way to keep herd records—the Angus Herd Management System (AHMS). Since then, more than 1,000 breeders have signed up and are using the computer software program.

AHMS is the ramp breeders are using to the Information Superhighway. And once they enter, most of them vow never to go back. No matter how large or small your herd is, or how young or old you are, AHMS can benefit your operation. Any user, including the ones featured in this story, will tell you the possibilities are unlimited. It's a management tool that can help you plan your yearly breeding, track your veterinary records, store ancestry information and customize selling sheets and sale catalogs. But they will also tell you that, like almost anything worthwhile, learning the system takes time and effort.

"What I know about computers I have completely taught myself," admits Bill Switzer, Cambridge, Iowa, who turned on his first computer after he retired from Iowa State University. Now at age 70, Switzer enters data, uses simulated breeding and prints out reports on his 470 cows with ease and confidence.

"I don't have the expertise to do everything this program is capable of, but I know the people at the Association who have the technical knowledge to walk me through it," Switzer says. "With their help, I can figure out almost anything I need."

Many breeders have attended workshops offered by the Association as a "crash course" in the program. While most of these workshops have been held in St. Joseph, several states are planning their own, making it more convenient and affordable for a larger number of users to attend. But even if you don't attend a workshop, the Association's AHMS phone support team is available to work you through problems and answer questions.

"It's not a matter of is the program worth learning or not, but can you spare the time to
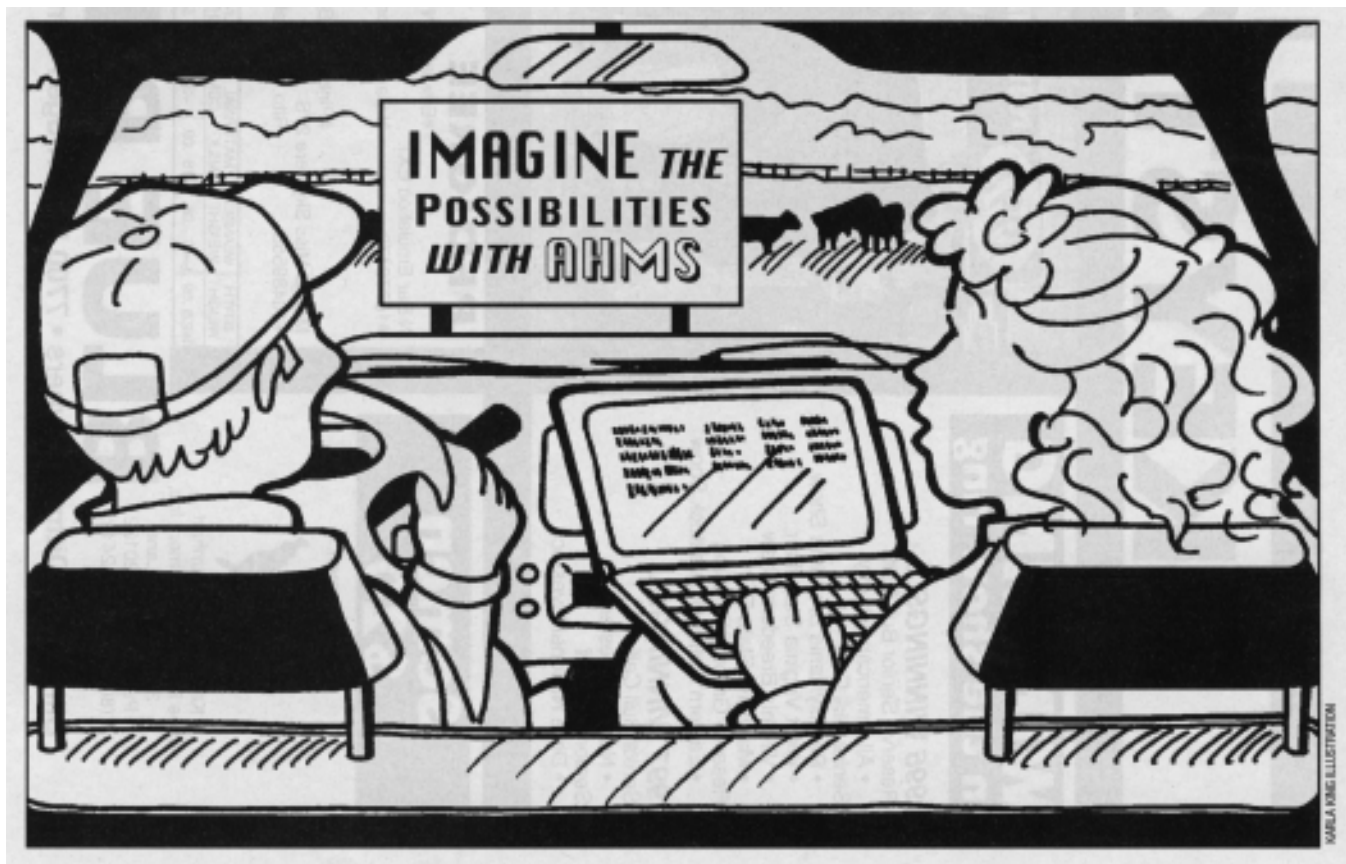
learn?" he says. "Everyone has 24 hours in a day, and it's a matter of how you prioritize those hours."

Switzer has invested a great deal of time in the program as he was one of the original AHMS field testers. The ability to plan ahead, in every aspect of your operation, is what he likes so much about it.

"It seems like a lot of people base their breeding decisions on luck and intuition," says Switzer, "which for some has worked. But luck and intuition are not consistent. We now have something to do our planning with that's not luck or intuition — AHMS."

Don't expect to see results overnight. "The first few seasons I used it, or anyone uses it, the general consensus is we're wasting a lot of time with this," he says. "But you have to see what it can do for you over time before you see the true value. What you pay for the program doesn't in any way approach the value you receive in the first-calf crop."

Tom Perrier, Eureka, Kan., was on the American Angus Association Board of Directors when the funding to start the AHMS department was approved. "It's purely a service to the members," he says. "The Association is more qualified than private industry to develop a program like this because it works directly with the records, so you have a continuity there. Plus, when you invest not only your money, but also your time in a program, you need a sense of stability that the folks standing behind it are always going to be there. I'm confident the Association always will be."

How a lot of users fill their niche with AHMS is with Crystal Reports, the customized report and summary program included with the software. Even though Perrier doesn't consider himself a master of Crystal Reports, he's managed to produce two annual production sale catalogs with it.

"If you download the pedigrees and performance information directly off of the records, it will be as close to right as you can get it," Perrier says. "Because you don't have to re-key it, the number of mistakes is drastically reduced."

Perrier estimates that by setting up the sale lot pages with Crystal Reports and giving it to the printer camera-ready, he's reduced his catalog expenses by 20 percent. "Once you've developed it, it's faster than using a typewriter or word processor and last-minute changes that wouldn't have been possible within deadline are easier.

"Crystal Reports is not the easiest thing

in the world, but simple projects aren't a problem," Perrier says. "You can get a lot of information and you can do a lot with it, but you have to work at it."

Stevenson Angus Ranch, Hobson, Mont., produces their annual sale catalog by pulling up information with Crystal Reports and then downloading it into Pagemaker, a desktop publishing program. The final layouts are done on Macintosh and go camera-ready to the printer.

Sara Stevenson is responsible for the 1,000 cow records the ranch keeps. Talking with her about the ins and outs of AHMS leads you to believe she's worked with it all her life, but she really began in 1995.

"I think the big advantage I have is that I was in college during the computer age and had more exposure to programs, especially Windows," she says. "You have to think of your computer as a tool. That's when computers are frustrating, when they're not a tool, when you ask them to do more than they can."

The Stevensons access data from the system every day, especially during the breeding and calving seasons. Breeding records help to establish calving records, which become the main point of reference for an animal's life on the ranch. Being able to double check calving information with breeding records is a favorite feature of Sara's.

"I like the speed of pulling up an animal and getting everything you need on one screen," she says. "With the push of a button all the records we need are right there."

Even though Sara is in charge of the herd's records, her husband Darrell, as well as other Stevenson family members, are involved too.

"Darrell loves the breeding feature," she says. "His favorite is the pedigree screen because he has everything he ever wanted to know about his cows right there. It would take him hours to look it all up by hand because it would be in three or four different places."

Using the software to keep their Angus. Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) current is also a big advantage for the Stevensons. They know the expected progeny differences (EPDs) they provide to potential buyers are the most up-to-date numbers available.

"I don't see how you can use AHMS and not be enrolled in the AHIR program, or vice versa," Sara says. "Our family lives by that information. We couldn't function day-to-day without it."

The Stevensons have been on the program since the beginning, and with their large herd, you can see why the program is a benefit. A common misconception many small breeders have is that AHMS is only for large herds. This isn't the case at all.

"There's a lot of features on the software I don't even use," Stevenson says. "And some of the sorting and entry processes are tedious and inconvenient when you've got 1,000 calves in a pen. Considering that, I'd say smaller breeders could benefit from the system in ways that we haven't found."

George Wrightstone, West Point, Texas, has less than 20 Angus in his herd and would change the mind of any small breeder who is skeptical of the system.

"I would say the overall program would be more beneficial to the small and medium user because bigger operations wouldn't take the time to use all of the features to their fullest potential," he says. "I'm there when the cow calves and when the cow is in heat. I don't have to rely on hired help to get accurate information into my system, and therefore I have a lot of confidence in it."

Wrightstone uses the system to make breeding decisions, record AHIR information, access cow production records, and as a sales tool for current and potential customers.

"I won't buy an animal today without production information," he says. "Every cow and bull in my herd has a five-generation pedigree. When a calf is born, I have a six-generation pedigree for him."

Wrightstone owned a personal computer before he purchased the software, but by no means considers himself a pro.

"I really need to go take a computer class," he says. "I am illiterate on the computer, so I don't use it to its fullest potential. But for what I need it to do, I'm having a ball.

"I think small breeders would be foolish not to try the program, especially if they're enrolled in the AHIR program," he adds. "AHIR is just as valuable to a small herd as it is to a big herd. AHMS has made all the difference for me."

Only members of the American Angus Association are eligible to purchase the software. The system costs $300 and updates are free to users. Contact Scott Johnson, director of Angus Herd Management Systems, at (816) 233-3101 for more information or to get your herd on the AHMS Superhighway.