

# Nine Steps To Success

*Packers and producers talk about how you can improve beef's quality and consistency*

BY ERIC GRANT

Choice  
Yield Grade 2  
750 pounds (lb.)

**V**irtually every packer interviewed for this story said the same thing: If seedstock producers could deliver cattle that produced carcasses with these specs every time without exception, the beef industry could take back much of the market share it's lost during the last 25 years.

But as every producer knows, the tough part is hitting that target consistently.

Let's face it. Beef quality is affected as much by your implant program, the price of feed, the current market situation for beef, or even the truck driver transporting your cattle to the packing plant as it is by your genetic-improvement program.

Still, Angus producers are in an enviable position. Today branded beef programs -

and marketing outlets - demand Angus genetics. Angus cattle also possess top-notch maternal characteristics and perform well in the feedyard. Demand has been so good for Angus cattle that just about every other breed in the country now offers black-hided genetics to ride on the breed's coattails.

There's always room for improvement, however, and the key to producing high-quality, consistent beef, say packers, is learning how to balance both reproductive and carcass traits. Here are nine steps you and your commercial customers can take to

ensure you're meeting the demands of the packing business and exceeding the expectations of consumers.

FILLING THE  
  
NEED

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

## Nine Steps To Success



### Communicate, communicate, communicate.

The days of industry segmentation, where no one talks to each other about how their genetics performed throughout the system, are ending — fast. Seedstock producers who work closely with their commercial customers, feedlots and packers to gather information and improve their cattle stand a much better chance of surviving the next century than those who don't. Many people call this type of collective effort an alliance.

Registered Angus breeders need to continue to open lines of communication with the various people using their genetics to discover what genetics and management practices work best.

**"Those individuals who took the lead several years ago on collecting carcass data are really reaping the benefits today," says Alan Waggoner.**

Currently, just about every major packing company in the country is working with seedstock producers to produce and cultivate high-quality cattle. This is a relatively new development in the beef business, and it's one that will have a profound effect on the way cattle are produced in the future.

"It's often difficult to get a packer interested in providing carcass data or making it worthwhile to improve quality," says Dale Davis, an Angus breeder from Belgrade, Mont., who has long been a marketing innovator. "For an alliance to work, it has to be good for everyone involved — producers, feeders, packers and the people who are developing the outlets for the consumer."



### Collect carcass information.

Angus breeders and the American Angus Association have been industry leaders in this area. In fact, the Association has the most extensive breed-specific carcass database in the country and the most accurate and extensive carcass expected progeny differences (EPDs) in the world. This competitive advantage would not have been possible had it not been for the data-collection efforts of progressive seedstock and commercial producers.

Still, producers should realize that collection of carcass information is not a static enterprise; it's an ongoing commitment. Simply put, the more information you gather, the better information you'll have.

"Those individuals who took the lead several years ago on collecting carcass data are really reaping the benefits today," says Alan Waggoner, former associate executive director for the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program. He continues as consultant for the CAB Program.

"Those who waited are playing catch up, and the dollar differences for proven cattle are fairly substantial for those who have worked for better quality compared to those who haven't," he adds.



### Use carcass EPDs.

Once you have carcass information in hand and can identify specific areas of weakness in your breeding program, the quickest way to make improvements is to use sires with proven carcass EPDs. If you're weak on marbling, use a better-marbling bull. If you're weak on muscling, breed your

cows to a higher-muscling bull. If you're right on, use a balanced bull that offers acceptable EPDs in all carcass traits.

"One of the nice things about the American Angus Association is that it has such good carcass EPDs," says Tim Schiefelbein, who heads up Monfort's value-based marketing procurement program. (Monfort is the nation's second-largest packing company.) "By just switching to Angus, a commercial producer can improve marbling in his cow herd almost automatically."

At the same time, watch out for sires that excel in certain traits but may hurt you in others. For instance, a high-muscling bull might negatively affect calving ease or milk. A high-marbling sire might not possess enough growth.

"During my nine years with the CAB Program, I saw producers make drastic changes in the quality of their cattle by studying and using sires with proven carcass EPDs," says Waggoner. "They began interpreting the data in a better way and using better bulls because of it."



### Balance selection for carcass traits with selection for production and fertility traits.

There's a common misconception that selecting for carcass traits often means you'll negatively affect production traits, such as fertility or feed efficiency. This is untrue if you're using EPDs correctly. With careful analysis of sires, you can fairly easily identify bulls that excel in both production and carcass quality.

"The most encouraging lesson we've learned is that you don't have to sacrifice gain, conversion or other economically important traits to have a good carcass," says Jim Norwood, chief executive officer of Farmland Supreme Beef Alliance (FSBA).

In late 1996 Norwood helped launch this integrated beef alliance, which works closely with Angus seedstock producers to produce bulls for commercial customers.

"At first, I wondered if we were headed down the right road by encouraging somebody to make \$20 on a carcass if it

cost \$40 in other areas to get it. We've found that doesn't have to happen," he says.



### **Breed for marbling, muscle and weight — but keep a close eye on management.**

If you're spending a great deal of time trying to balance these three traits genetically, you're on the right track. But don't forget that management, such as time on feed and implant schedules, can negatively affect your hard work and investment — and ultimately the quality of your cattle.

For instance, when fed-cattle prices fell through the floor earlier this year, feedlots held on to their cattle for too long in hopes of improved prices. The result was too many heavyweight and overly fat cattle, although there was a positive effect on marbling.

Producers should zero in on cattle that mature quickly, reach harvest optimum at a desirable weight (ideally in the 1,150-lb. to 1,200-lb. range), and grade Choice or better. Once that improvement is made, they should relay this information to the person feeding the cattle and make sure the cattle are managed properly to avoid overweight cattle that are overly fat.

"The packing industry this year has been inundated with very heavy cattle. We're seeing record industry highs in carcass weights," says Beef America's Jim Addison. Addison is the company's CAB Program director. "The plants have to continuously adjust to those heavy weights. When weights fluctuate like they have this year, it's hard for our plant to adjust, and it's difficult to sell this product on an ongoing basis. If you're heavy one week and light the next, your inventory changes drastically in the sales of this product."

Producers also should look at their implant programs, because implants have been shown to negatively affect marbling when used improperly.

"You need to keep a close eye on the Choice/Select spread," adds Waggoner. "If there has historically been a \$3 spread during a certain time of the year when you

plan to sell your fed cattle, then using an implant program may be a wash. But if you've got a big spread — such as \$20 — you need to weigh the benefits of your implant program against the losses that you may be seeing from not having enough Choice-quality cattle."



### **Focus on consistency.**

The biggest problem facing the packing industry — and its move into the branded beef business — is the lack of consistency in the nation's cow herd. Again, this can be addressed through genetic selection and management.

When looking for new bloodlines to introduce to your cow herd, for instance, look for proven sires with high-accuracy EPDs. Producers have used these sires in lots of cow herds under countless environmental conditions, and the bulls have withstood the test of time.

"Packers are looking for as much consistency as they can get," adds Waggoner. "They want the cattle they buy to be consistently good. You can find a lot of consistency in poor quality, but financially these cattle don't make the wheels turn."

Adds Monfort's Schiefelbein: "Quality varies so much during different times of the year. This winter, we had way too many overweight cattle. In the fall, we typically lack a lot of cattle that grade well. We're wanting — and going to pay for — quality and consistency in an even package throughout the year. We hope this will encourage producers to take a look at some of the marketing opportunities during other times of the year."

One way to improve quality and consistency is to segregate your cattle into groups of similar age, breeding, weight or frame size prior to finishing. This allows you to market cattle at optimum periods of time, rather than sending them all to the packer when some are too fat and others haven't received enough feed.

"Within any pen of cattle, you're going to overfeed a third, underfeed a third and feed a third just right," explains Waggoner. "If you can sort cattle into like groups, you

stand a much better chance of improving consistency. This also helps you market the cattle in a more profitable and efficient manner."



### **Eliminate the troublemakers.**

Make sure you use carcass information to identify areas of strength and weakness. If you've got cattle or bloodlines that consistently aren't up to snuff when it comes to carcass quality, get rid of them.

"It's really simple when you think about it," says Schiefelbein. "If cattle don't make the grade, get too fat or too heavy, eliminate those bloodlines from your breeding program. It's really amazing how people can improve their cattle so quickly. You don't have to go for the top-marbling bull, but you can eliminate or sort out your problem carcass bulls based on what your data tells you. If a bull is below zero for marbling or muscling, don't use him."



### **Manage cattle with the consumer in mind.**

That means doing the little things right. A good place to start is the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, which periodically conducts the National Beef Quality Audits. The audits have shown producers can improve the quality of beef and bolster the industry's competitive position by doing a few things:

- . Don't overfeed.
- . Don't brand if you don't have to.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

## Nine Steps To Success

■ Identify cattle-handling equipment that can cause bruises or hide damage.

. Don't overly stress cattle prior to slaughter.

. Dehorn your cattle.

. Put intramuscular injections in the neck rather than in the top butt or round, where they do more damage.

. Try to improve marbling without exceeding targets for cover fat.

More importantly, keep in mind consumers love beef. They love its tenderness, its juiciness and its taste—and they pay more for it than they do for any other meat in the grocery store or restaurant.

"Consumers want marbling (the taste fat), but they don't want excess, trimmable fat (the waste fat)," says Gary Smith of Colorado State University.



### **Develop ways of source verifying your cattle.**

Most packers agree the next major step for the industry will be source verification. In coming years, packers will know who produced the cattle they're buying, what (breeding) they are, how they were managed and when they received vaccinations or medications. All of this information will follow the cattle from the ranch to the kill floor.

In turn, this information will help packers and meat processors make improvements in the branded products they're producing because it will help them find cattle that are more consistent and of higher quality. Cattle of unknown breeding, background and management will have a much more difficult time remaining competitive in the marketplace of the future.

**"Seedstock producers have to think about ways of identifying their cattle and tracing their cattle through the system," says Waggoner.**

"We want to produce a quality product for consumers, and to do that we must know where our cattle come from and what genetics are being used," says Farmland's Norwood. "If we use proven cattle from proven programs, it will only make our branded products that much better."

Adds Waggoner: "Seedstock producers have to think about ways of identifying their cattle and tracing their cattle through the system. They need to be concerned about supplying genetics to a producer who doesn't maintain identity. In the future you will have to document how your cattle performed and what kinds of carcasses they produced. This is the wave of the future, and where we're going to be in the next millennium."

