

# Profitability and Sustainability

*BIF President Donnell Brown says seedstock producers must remain focused on the needs of the commercial industry.*

As a fifth-generation rancher from Throckmorton, Texas, Donnell Brown has spent most of his lifetime focused on the wants and needs of the commercial cattleman. He's always strived to produce seedstock that will help his customers be more profitable and sustainable in today's beef industry.

After graduating from Texas Tech in 1993, Donnell and his bride, Kelli, moved home to Throckmorton to help manage the R.A. Brown Ranch seedstock business. Donnell says their goal when getting married in 1991 was to raise cows, kids and Quarter Horses; objectives they continue to focus on today.

Breeding and genetics have been a passion of Donnell's since an early age. With this interest, he became involved in the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) attending his first BIF Research Symposium and Convention in 1993.

"Attending that first convention, I was amazed how I could sit down in a small session or visit in the hallways with the gurus of beef cattle genetics," Donnell explains. "Because of BIF, I was able to build relationships with and learn from those movers and shakers, the great thinkers who help us keep our business based on sound science. BIF is my favorite convention each year."

Donnell was elected to the BIF Board of Directors in 2012 and served as BIF president. His term as president ended at the 2018 BIF Research Symposium and



*2018 BIF President Donnell Brown attended his first BIF convention in 1993, brushing elbows with the authors of research articles he read while a student at Texas Tech. Donnell (right) served as president after Marty Ropp's (left) term ended at last year's convention.*

Convention in Loveland, Colo., this past June.

"Donnell brings a practical and forward-thinking approach to BIF," says Jane Parish, BIF executive director. "He understands the importance of genetic improvement at the ranch level and is a tireless advocate for sharing science-based knowledge throughout the industry."

## The ranch

For more than a century, west Texas has been home to the R.A. Brown Ranch. Named the 1993 BIF Seedstock Producer of the Year, the Brown family currently supplies Angus, Red Angus and SimAngus genetics to cattlemen far and wide across the nation.

"Our mission at R.A. Brown Ranch is very clear. We are striving to improve the efficiency of converting

God's forage into healthy, nutritious, great tasting beef to better feed His people," Donnell explains.

His parents, Rob and Peggy, have been proactive in estate planning for decades. In 2013 the couple led their family through a generational transfer, successfully passing their ranch on to their four children while enjoying good health. Donnell explains his parents' goal was to "keep the ranch in the family and the family in the ranch."

At that time, Donnell and Kelli attained ownership of the R.A. Brown seedstock division, which they had managed for 23 years. Today they continue the tradition of raising and merchandising

top quality seedstock, along with their two sons, Tucker and Lanham.

Both boys work on the ranch. Tucker manages the R.A. Brown wildlife program and his wife, Karley, is a school teacher. Lanham graduated from Texas Tech in May and returned to the ranch to pursue his passion of training and showing Quarter Horses.

The R.A. Brown Ranch has been recognized for its excellence many times. The ranch received the National Cattlemen's Beef Association Cattle Business of the Century Award and American Quarter Horse Association/Bayer Best Remuda Award, and was recognized by *BEEF* magazine as one of the top providers of seedstock genetics in the country in 2015 and 2016.

## Breeding program

To produce superior genetics that fit the needs of the beef industry, the Browns use artificial insemination (AI), embryo transfer (ET), ultrasound, DNA and feed efficiency testing.

Donnell explains the strategy of their breeding program is to use a high percentage of proven sires in an extensive ET program utilizing young females as donor cows.

They DNA test all bulls and heifers. He says collecting the heifers' genomic data is actually more valuable than the bulls. "With a DNA test, I can increase her EPD accuracy by about two lifetimes of production and we get that information before her first breeding," he explains.

"When I am armed with that information, I can better produce cattle that fit our customers' needs."

A GrowSafe system was installed on the ranch three years ago. Today their genetic toolbox includes three years of feed intake data on all bulls and replacement heifers.

"I am amazed with the genetic progress we can make in feed efficiency," Donnell says. "This information will help us produce more with less. Increasing efficiency is a must as we work to feed a growing global population."

## Marketing program

The Brown family has been marketing seedstock bulls since 1895. With the help of strong cooperating herds, they currently sell 850 bulls each year with sales hosted at the ranch on the second Wednesday of October and second Wednesday of March. They also sell 150 registered females each year, including every 4-year-old female.

"Our goal is rapid genetic progress," Donnell says. "By strategically selling every 4-year-old female, we speed up the generation interval of our females.

"The benefits of this strategy (implemented in 2001) are threefold: 1) rapid genetic progress; 2) gives customers the opportunity to purchase females when they are entering the prime of their life; and 3) gives us cash flow to sustain our extensive ET program."

The strength of their program is shown by the high percentage of repeat customers, as well as having 25 bulls as major AI studs.

## Leader

An influential and effective leader since high school, Donnell served as president of both the Texas FFA and National FFA. He has assisted with strategic planning for four different breed associations and the NCBA.

"Even before Donnell became president of BIF, he showed leadership in the organization in many ways," Jane says. "He energetically focused board discussions on strategies for the future and offered up new ideas that helped BIF continue its legacy of leading the industry in collaborative genetic improvement efforts."

## Why BIF

Donnell says, "As seedstock producers, our job is to make progress through selection. EPDs can help us, but we need to make sure the tools we use to describe our cattle, specifically EPDs, continue to be based on the most advanced, sound science — that is a must."

In 1968, BIF was formed as a means to standardize programs and methodologies, and to create greater awareness, acceptance and usage of performance concepts in beef production. The organization's three-leaf clover logo would come to represent industry, extension and research, just as the organization's annual symposium would become the premier forum bringing industry segments together to discuss and

evaluate performance topics.

"BIF is focused on the application of sound science to make a lasting impact on the beef business," Donnell explains. "The BIF convention is the crossroads where academia, breed associations and cattle producers all come together.

"BIF brings people interested in genetic selection together to apply science to the beef community. We help scientists get on track with what the producer needs, we help the producer get on track with what scientists have developed and we help keep breed associations relevant."

## Looking forward

Today's beef producer has a wide spectrum of challenges to face. "As BIF leaders, we need to go back to the basics and discuss accurate measurement and proper contemporary grouping," Donnell says. "We need to address multi-trait selection indices. The application of all-purpose indices focused on long-term profitability in the beef business needs to be our focus."

Donnell has been researching and using selection indexes for more than 27 years. "I believe the multi-trait selection index is the right tool to help us select for long-term profitability and sustainability in the beef industry," he says.

Donnell passed the BIF reins to the next president this past June, but there's no doubt his passion and commitment to BIF's principles and goals will continue for years to come.

"BIF is a beef organization without politics," Donnell summarizes. "BIF meetings are about finding the best way to produce the best cattle at the least cost using sound science.

"Two things you won't find at a BIF meeting is propaganda or politics." **AJ**

*Editor's note: Article provided by BIF communications.*