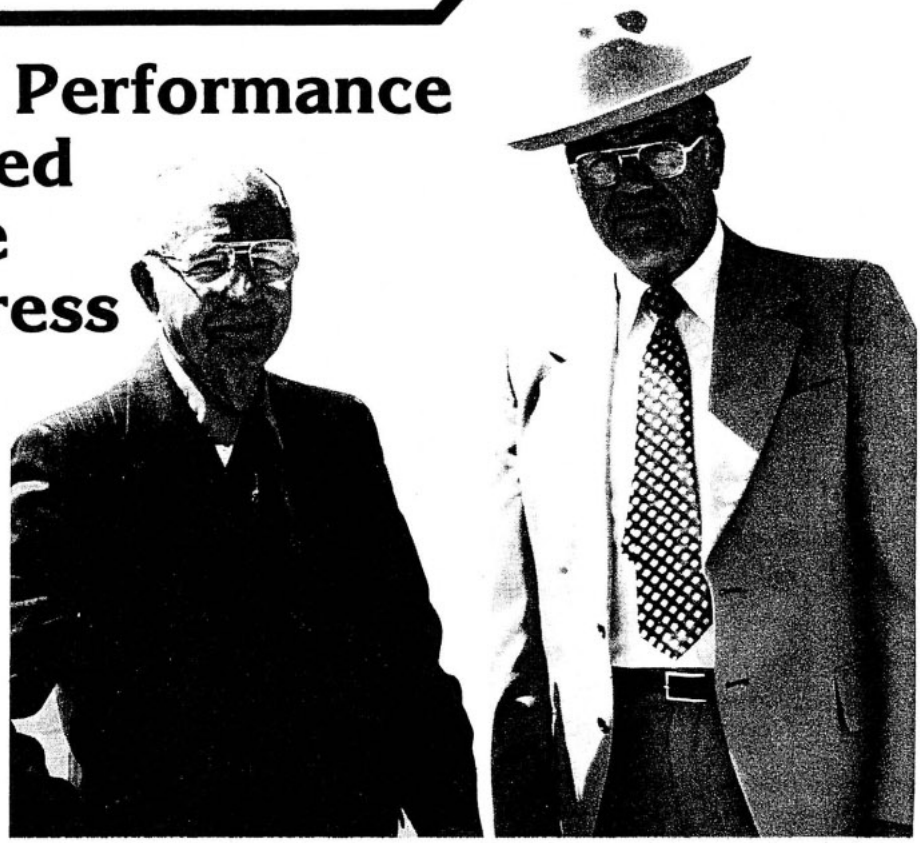
THE TIFTON TEST

Confidence In Performance Testing Has Led To Twenty-five Years of Progress

by Nancy Ann Sayre



Byron Southwell and Dr. W.C. McCormick have developed more than a highly respected bull test station at Tifton—they have developed an air of confidence around the entire concept of performance testing. Southwell initiated the Tifton test 25 years ago, but he has been performance testing herds since 1932. McCormick is director of the Coastal Plains Experiment station.

"Confidence in an individual, a program, an institution . . . this has a lot to do with how things are accepted. We had the location and the people. Over time we built up a following . . . breeders have confidence in our station, the program and the performance."

The remarks of Dr. W.C. McCormick, director of the Georgia Coastal Plains Experiment Station at Tifton, refer to the station's bull testing program.

Established 25 years ago as the first central bull test in the Southeast (and one of the earliest in the country), the Tifton station has developed a strong reputation. Indeed, confidence of commercial and purebred cattlemen has been the key. Progress can be measured by increases in participation, gain figures and sale averages.

Although the station centers around an annual 140-day gain evaluation of young bulls, the roots of its success go much deeper. Individuals completing the feed test may draw the limelight, but the real challenge is in improving the genetics in both the herds where tested bulls are raised and those where they are used. Acceptance and utilization of tested bulls are results of a belief in the total concept of performance testing.

To the three men who have been in charge of the test over the past two and a half decades, education in the basics of performance has been the primary concern. They have tried to form opinions and make selection decisions on the basis of production facts, and preach the same. Establishment and subsequent growth of the bull test has been a logical upshot.

Just Normal Procedure

Byron Southwell, now 83, performance tested cattle as early as 1932 and initiated the Tifton test in 1958. He has since retired as head of the experiment station's animal husbandry division. McCormick succeeded him in that capacity and is currently director of the Coastal Plains station. Dr. Clyde Triplett, recently retired 20-year extension animal scientist, coordinated the bull tests for the past nine years.

Under the guidance of these men, Tifton's station has been a pioneer force in performance testing. Their influence and work in the Southeast has helped establish breeding and selection principles across the country. They firmly believe in performance records, and Georgia cattlemen have been a receptive audience for their teachings.

"Perhaps we had less to unlearn and more to gain here in the Southeast—we weren't steeped in (cattle breeding) tradition," comments McCormick. "Most importantly, though, we had a person around which to build a performance program, a person who believed in it."

He gives Southwell credit for establishing the air of confidence emphasized so strongly. And according to Southwell, the use of performance information is simple logic. His approach is convincing.

"I never had any other idea except that animals were supposed to be creatures of usefulness rather than something to entertain people. It seemed fairly simple to me to rely on records to measure growth, reproduction and other traits."

Southwell first began testing cattle at the experiment station in 1932 on a cooperative basis with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Starting with the first crop of Polled Hereford calves, he fed all bull calves and kept weight records. "Just normal procedure" he says, but it was a foreign idea to most purebred breeders at that time.

As McCormick adds, they had the two strongest improvement forces in beef cattle breeding working for them: poverty and performance. A limited budget forced them

to improve what they had rather than purchase popular bulls, and performance records kept them honest.

Later, Georgia Angus breeders contributed money for the station to start an Angus research herd as well. Southwell built that herd with the same attitude and his sphere of influence expanded.

Dr. Clyde Triplett, recently retired extension animal scientist, has coordinated the Tifton test for the past nine years. The testing program has helped improve the genetics in purebred and commercial herds across the Southeast.

Designed to Improve Georgia's Genes

By the time the central bull test was established in 1958, Southwell's ideas were well seeded in Georgia. The test station itself provided an opportunity for the state's entire cattle population to benefit from the fairly simple guidelines encouraged by this performance advocate.

The test was designed to compare genetic differences in the growth rate of bulls from various purebred herds across the state (all breeds) by keeping the environment and ration constant for a given period of time.

The intent was twofold: Purebred breeders were encouraged to know more about their herds by identifying superior genetics, and commercial breeders were given an opportunity to buy the tested animals. A sale of the top performers has been hosted each year since the start of the test; this was aimed mainly at commercial customers, yet it was hoped that purebred breeders would utilize the very top individuals in their own herds.

From the start Southwell felt purebred breeders, in order to supply good genetic material to the commercial population, had to have their herds on a performance program. The idea naturally met with some resistance. However, interest in the test and its results has grown steadily. So much that there have been at least two bulls nominated for each space available in recent years. (Top capacity of the facility is 150 head.) Strong sales are a watermark for continuing demand.

Along with steady growth in acceptance and credibility of the test, the type and quality of cattle has improved substantially in the 25-year history. Angus participants perhaps illustrate these changes more dramatically than any other breed.

Angus Entries Have Come a Long Way

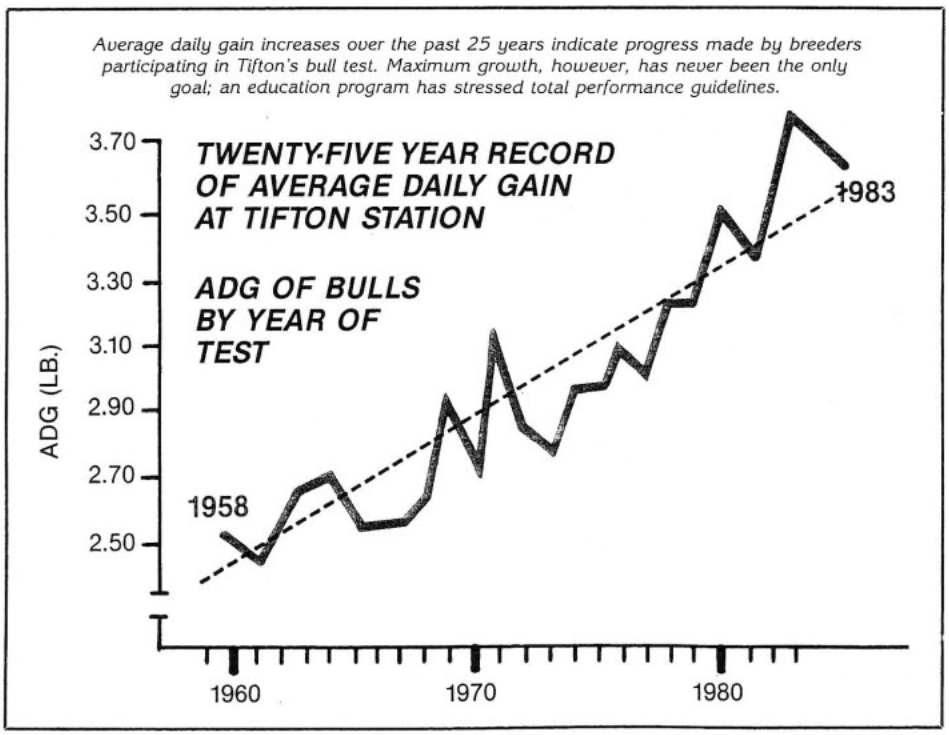
For the first few years of the test, very few Angus breeders participated. And those that did had a diffucult time finding bulls that would gain comparably to other breed representatives. In 1983, however, 55 Angus constituted the largest breed group among the 10-breed consignment of 134 bulls.

Besides the shift in sheer numbers, Angus entries reflect a change in profile and frame size expected with increased growth and rate of gain. Most importantly, weight figures among the bulls indicate progress, genetic progress.

Average daily gain (ADG) averages for all breeds have shown a general increase since the initial years (refer to illustration). When the 25th set of bulls completed test this spring, an Angus bull topped the entire group with an adjusted yearling weight of 1,406 lb. and a 4.75-lb. ADG which matched the test record set in 1982 by a top Angus performer. The 1983 graduate provides extra proof of the test's success—he is a son of a 1980 Georgia test-topper (Calhoun test) and grandson of Tifton's 1977 high seller.

Weight per day of age (WDA) is also a figure carefully studied by Tifton customers today. For a long time, explains McCormick, 2.74 was the magic number since a 2.74-lb. WDA meant a 1,000-lb. weight at 365 days. Now, a 3.3 mark or better (which translates to a 1,200-lb. yearling weight) is necessary to be competitive. An individual broke the 4-lb. barrier for the first time on last year's test and the 1982 top performing Angus entry posted a 3.64-lb. final WDA to better the record of any Angus tested there. His figures helped boost the Angus gain and yearling weight figures higher than any breed group, and earned a record price of $34,000 as well.

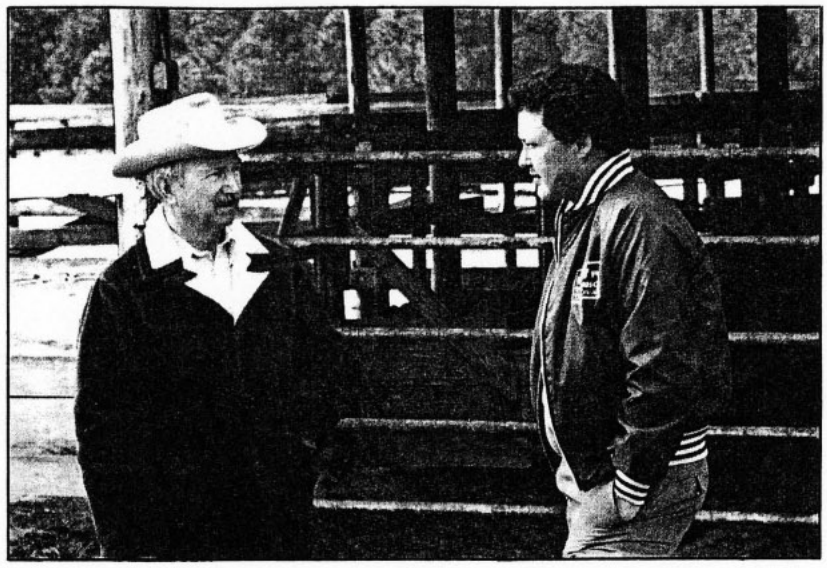
Average daily gain increases over the past 25 years indicate progress made by breeders participating in Tifton's bull test. Maximum growth, however, has never been the only goal; an education program has stressed total performance guidelines.



Growth is not the Only Goal

McCormick is particularly pleased with the progress shown. The WDA record, he emphasizes, combines pre-weaning and post-weaning performance into a single figure. In order to boast a high WDA and weigh 1,200 or 1,300 lb. at a year of age, an animal cannot have any major problems.

"He doesn't have too many days to be off the track to record those figures. A bull can't have pneumonia or founder or have any real structural problems and get there. A bull has to do it all." McCormick also adds, "This is all part of performance."



Dr. Robert Stewart (right) assumed responsibility for the annual Tifton bull test this year when Dr. Clyde Triplett retired. The facility in the background is the original test barn designed by Byron Southwell 25 years ago.

Total performance goes even deeper, though. It traces right back to a few basic concepts. McCormick eleborates:

"Growth is important, but that female must raise a calf every year. In fact she must calve as a 2-year-old, breed back and calve regularly unassisted. She must have a little longevity, milk and raise a calf—by herself. Once you realize this, you'll make those purebred cattle work. They are the seed stock, they should be better."

Triplett agrees. He took over the test when the extension service was given that responsibility nine years ago. The experiment station and the extension service now cooperate with the state cattlemen's association in sponsoring the test and sale; Triplett coordinates the test. The role change was made since the test served more of a service and educational purpose than research.

"The idea," says Triplett, "is to get breeders to performance test on their own. This test station has been a good educational tool, a good reference point.

"We're not trying to supply a significant part of the state's bull population—all the test stations in this state (that includes a test at Calhoun and a newly established forage test as well as the Tifton facility) account for less than five percent of the bulls needed for Georgia's 950,000 brood cows. This is just intended to be a pilot, demonstration-type program."

The influence of the test station and the philosophies behind it have served that purpose well, although there is no way to measure the actual impact on the cattle industry. Results have reached far. The Tifton test is recognized as a source of superior genetics across the Southeast. In fact, the scope of its influence is national. Consignors and buyers represent several states.

Each of the men in leadership roles at Tifton recognize a significant change in attitude among area purebred Angus breeders.

"Everyone used to head west for a braggin' bull," says McCormick. "Now bull studs and top breeders come here for our top bulls." And he adds Southeastern cattlemen do better buying bulls bred and proven to perform in that environment.

Better Bulls, Better Prices

The record setters have demanded top prices. This reflects belief in the figures and provides extra incentive for breeders to develop and consign the best possible individuals. It also, however, has changed the complexion of the sale. The purpose remains the same—to provide commercial breeders with access to proven genetics (only the top two-thirds of those completing test are allowed to sell). At the same time, many commercial breeders are discouraged by high sale figures and an increased percentage of purebred bidding.

Competition never hurts, though. It spurs progress and provides a teaching ground of its own. And with the progress shown at Tifton, commercial men are presented with far superior growth genes than before, even if they cannot afford the top individuals. Serious commercial operations continue to utilize the opportunity; Cypress Woods Corp. has purchased Tifton-tested bulls in nearly every sale for use in their Ridgeland, S.C., commercial herd.

Education is still the primary concern. Confidence has been the key. Acceptance across the state, the Southeast and the nation is proof of inroads made over the past 25 years.

Southwell, McCormick and Triplett each attribute the progress to a lesson in the whole concept of performance selection, not just acceptance of the 140-day feed test.

After all, breeders could not continue to produce faster-gaining bulls each year if the genetics in their herds were not improving. And there is no doubt those bulls have improved herds where they were used. AJ