

# Numbers in Perspective

Maassen Brothers Ranch builds functional cows by phenotypic selection and artificial insemination.

by **Steve Suther**



PHOTO BY CHRIS LAVERGNE

It takes big-picture vision to manage range country while continuously improving the cows. Maassen Brothers Ranch is home to more than 1,000 Angus cows, mostly commercial cattle, that run on some 15,000 acres of Sandhills grass near Hershey, Neb.

Improving can only mean adding profitability on the ranch, says Barry Maassen, who ramrods the cow operations while his brother Brian directs the crop enterprises. There's some overlap in day-to-day operations, and finishing the 800 cattle each fall and winter is a shared responsibility.

For their nine years of progeny testing in cooperation with Rishel Angus and Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) and for their keen attention to bottom-line management, Maassen Brothers Ranch is the 2001 Commercial Commitment to

Excellence Award winner. The award will be presented at the CAB Annual Conference in San Antonio, Texas, Sept. 13-16.

The Maassens represent one of six producer operations — including four CAB-licensed feedlots — to be recognized at the conference for their outstanding contributions to CAB, the Angus breed and the beef industry.

### Seedstock connection

"We're not the type that likes attention and interviews," Barry Maassen says, "but we appreciate what CAB is doing for producers." He credits a long association with North Platte, Neb., purebred Angus producer Bill Rishel with the level of carcass quality obvious in their herd.

"I used to work for him when I first got out of school," Maassen says. The brothers assumed farm

management from their parents in the late 1980s after the government's dairy buyout.

"When we started putting some beef cows together to go with the 40 we had, we bought a few Rishel bulls," he says.

The Maassen herd has grown to about 850 spring- and 200 fall-calving cows. Tactics to build numbers included managing cows on shares and buying "speculator" cows with progeny potential for as little as \$350/head, Maassen explains, noting, "Any Angus bulls we buy are from Bill."

To their credit and good fortune, the brothers decided to buy interest in a young sire, the now famous, though recently deceased, B/R New Design 036. "Bill got us started gathering carcass data, and we've done it ever since, mainly through AI (artificial insemination)," Maassen says.

Over the years, more than 1,000 steer progeny have exceeded 35% acceptance for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, with sire-identified steers near 40% CAB.

### Herd improvement

While committed to proving genetic merit of individual Angus sires, Maassen takes more of an umbrella approach to improving the cow herd. It starts with phenotypic evaluation, with genotype secondary. "When we sort our heifers for replacements, we sort everything we like, then go through them and get the sire identified," he says. That plan works because Maassen only uses sires that fit his vision of the evolving cow herd.

"The heifers that calved this year are 80% sire-identified," he says. "Next year's are 100% sire-identified." For ease of management in the field,

►Above: For their nine years of progeny testing and keen attention to management, Brian (left) and Barry Maassen, Maassen Brothers Ranch, Hershey, Neb., receive the 2001 Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award from Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB).

females bear detailed numbered ear tags with age and pedigree information. "We have most of them in the written records, too," Maassen grins.

Records are important, but Maassen emphasizes the immediate advantages of stress-free weaning. Some cattle don't get individually weighed until winter, when heifers are vaccinated for brucellosis (Bang's disease) and steers are reimplanted. Preweaning shots are administered to 90-day-old calves at branding time. "When we wean, we don't bother them again for 30 days," he explains.

### Steady gains

No perfectionist, Maassen wrings steady improvement from a host of bottom-line numbers by keeping many variables within acceptable ranges, gradually nudging the ranges higher.

"We usually run about 93% pregnant in the fall — 95% just doesn't happen with so many demands on cows," he says. Still, he makes sure the 1,100- to 1,250-pound (lb.) cows know he is boss. "Some cows cull themselves at calving. Bad attitudes we cannot tolerate."

On the sire side, balanced expected progeny differences (EPDs) with positive numbers for marbling and ribeye lead the criteria.

"If we own an extreme-EPD bull, he wasn't that way when we bought him," Maassen says. He always looks at the numbers, but with an eye toward keeping the program between the ditches rather than on absolute requirements.

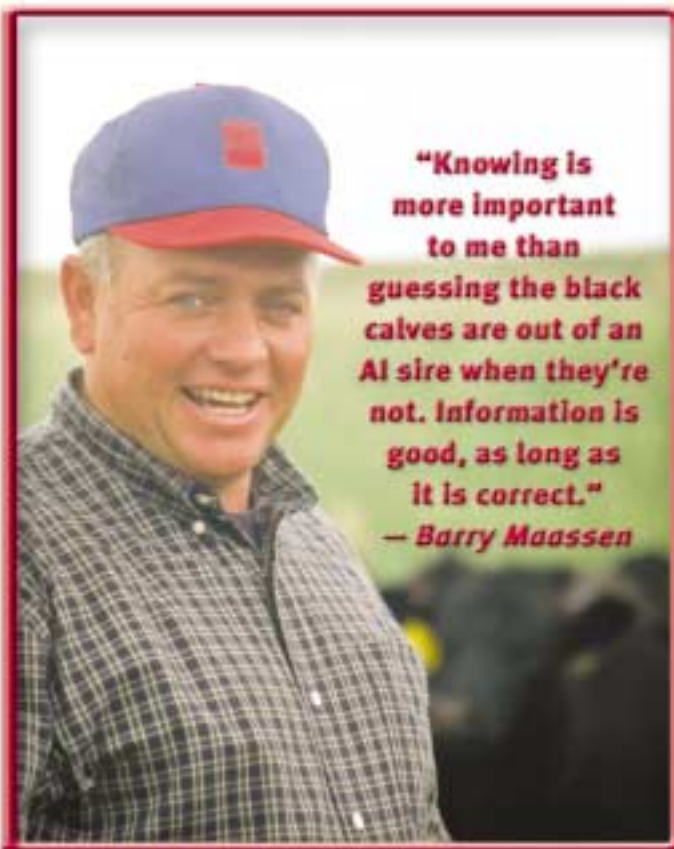
"People buy bulls with different EPD numbers available at different sales," he notes. "When you get up to 50 pieces of information and one thing is out of whack, you can't always let that stop you, especially on young bulls."

If some bull has all the numbers right, many bidders take leave of their senses, Maassen says. "He can have 23 legs, but that's the bull they are going after because of the numbers — but I say just



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PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER



because one bull doesn't do one thing, that doesn't make him a bad bull. If he fits in the blend, your cows are still going in the right direction."

### Breeding program

The Maassens synchronize and AI all the heifers and most of their cows. They bought Hereford bulls this year to serve as markers for terminal calves. "We turn those Hereford bulls

in for 10 days after AI on the cows. I want a baldie calf, to know for sure," Maassen says. "Knowing is more important to me than guessing the black calves are out of an AI sire when they're not. Information is good, as long as it is correct."

Heifers this year were synchronized and bred by AI one time, with home-raised cleanup bulls finishing the 25-day breeding period. Maassen

expects to get near the 93% pregnancy mark. He keeps fertility pressure on cows because only those that calve in the first 30 days stay in the main herd; others are relegated to natural service and terminal crossing.

"We have a minimum of 60 days postpartum before we worry about AI," Maassen says. And *worry* would be too strong a word. Growing up in the dairy business, AI, EPDs and steady progress are "nothing new to us," he says. "We're used to numbers; they don't bother us."

If there's ever a time when a Maassen female is spoiled — even a little bit — it's while she's raising her first calf and getting ready for her second. "We take our 2-year-olds out to a neighbor we buy hay from," Maassen says. "He takes good care of them, the hay they get is a little higher protein, and we cake them. They're by themselves so they don't get pushed around."

"When we get done weaning their calves, they stay by themselves unless we're in a pinch for drought. The 2- and 3-year-olds start calving together, and they get the best meadows. The old cows will be on cornstalks about 11 miles out where we drive them," he explains.

If the price is right, the Maassens may sell their fall cows, but they have been profitable the last couple of years. All of the steers and heifers sold last April weighing 480 lb. at \$1.16/lb.

The spring calves go into a feeding program on the farm, using old dairy facilities and plenty of space on adjacent cornstalks. Harvested at 14-15 months of age, a group of 134 steers last May exceeded 90% Choice with 37% CAB and only one Yield Grade (YG) 4. The cattle typically gain about 3.3 lb./day.

Maassen doesn't include progeny carcass data in female selection at this point, preferring to work on the sire end to exclude unfavorable genetics. "But if we ever got a Select, Yield Grade 4, we'd find the cow," he allows.

