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► Bob (left) and Rob Adams use BCIA as a merchandising tool for their bulls. Bob was a charter member of the Alabama BCIA.

Alabama BCIA:

Still on the Move

Story and photos by *Becky Mills*

Bob Adams had a simple reason for signing on as a charter member of Alabama's Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA) back in 1964. "We joined because it is what the name says — the beef cattle improvement association. It encourages people to keep records and, up until that time, people didn't have a recordkeeping system for performance."

Adams bought his first set of scales that year so his county agent could weigh his calves at weaning and give them a conformation score.

"We found out which were our best

cattle," says the Union Springs, Ala., breeder. "It helped us select the ones we ought to be keeping."

Along the way, Adams added birth weights, yearling weights and cow weights at weaning to his BCIA records.

Now, his son Rob, who was born the same year the Alabama BCIA was organized, manages the herd. He added scrotal circumference measurements, frame scores and ultrasound carcass measurements to the yearling weights. And, like many other Angus breeders, he's switched the recordkeeping over to the

American Angus Association's Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) program.

But to the Adamses, and more than 380 members across the state, BCIA is every bit as relevant as it was in 1964. This is in spite of the fact the organization has died a slow death in many other states.

Marketing venue

"The BCIA [in Alabama] is staying active because of the marketing programs," Rob says. Adams Angus Farm consigns bulls to the BCIA central grazing test and one of the two grain-based tests in the state. All three tests have sales for bulls that qualify. In addition, they market bulls from their 60- to 70-cow herd through the two annual BCIA multibreed sales.

"The bull tests are a marketing tool and a very good way to compare my cattle to the cattle from other breeders," Rob notes.

Bob adds, "BCIA helps the purebred producers stay in touch with the commercial producers."

Opelika, Ala., Angus breeder Tom Lovell also consigns his bulls to BCIA central bull tests and sales. "I like to put my bulls on BCIA performance tests to see how they

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►“The heart and soul of BCIA is recordkeeping,” says Alabama BCIA executive secretary Michelle Field (right), shown here with Opelika, Ala., Angus breeder Tom Lovell.



►For producers whose herds aren't big enough to support their own private sales, the BCIA central tests and sales provide a means for them to promote and market their herds to a larger audience.

perform and compare to other bulls. It also helps us small producers get performance and carcass data.”

He adds, “When they put on those sales, they advertise for us, prepare a good catalog and contact the commercial cattlemen. A few purebred breeders are big enough to put on their own sales. We're not.” Lovell has 75 registered cows and 50 commercial recipient cows at his Oak Bowery Farms.

“The purebred bull sales allow smaller producers to consign their bulls with 60 to 100 other bulls and allow the customers to come to one central location,” says Auburn animal scientist Lisa Kriese-Anderson.

The matchup between purebred and commercial producers occurred with almost 400 bulls at the 2001-2002 BCIA bull sales.

Kriese-Anderson adds, “The fun part is October through February. Most of the sales held every weekend are from producer-graduates of the Alabama BCIA. They grew and graduated. That is a sign of a successful program.”

Central testing

Scott Greiner, educational advisor for the Virginia BCIA, says central bull tests and sales have also kept the BCIA in his state thriving. Approximately 420 bulls were tested at Virginia's two central test stations last year.

“We've got a large number of seedstock providers [who] individually don't produce a large number of bulls,” he explains. “Many of these producers don't have the on-farm

facilities to develop and test their bulls. They don't have the critical mass to have tests and sales. With the central tests, they can collect important performance data and have a marketing outlet.”

He adds, “In Virginia, the central test program has a very strong reputation and rapport with commercial bull buyers and cattlemen. There is a demand for the sales and performance-tested bulls.”

Around 250 purebred and commercial producers belong to the Virginia BCIA, which started in 1955.

Heifer sales

Back in Alabama, bulls are definitely not the only hot commodity. BCIA also provides a marketing outlet for commercial producers through nine annual commercial heifer sales.

The beginning of these wildly successful sales was the 1981 BCIA heifer sale in Chilton County. Butch Lovelady, and his late father, Ralph, took their Angus-Simmental heifers to that one.

“We've participated every year,” Butch says. “The sales reach a more specific target market — producers who are looking for top-quality commercial heifers to go back to the farm. It is a very good marketing tool.”

Believe him. In the 2001-2002 Alabama BCIA heifer sales, 685 head sold. The open heifers averaged \$763 and bred heifers averaged \$1,164.

Lovelady comments, “The buyers have access to all the records on that heifer and the history of the sire and dam.”

That works both ways. When Lovelady buys bulls, he sees the same type of records. “Whether we buy directly from BCIA breeders or through BCIA sales, we know we'll see the records of the bulls, just like the producers who buy from us will see the records on the heifers.”

Recordkeeping

As for those records, BCIA executive secretary Michelle Field says, “The heart and soul of BCIA is recordkeeping. The foundation is individualized performance records, whether for purebred or commercial producers.”

While most purebred producers now depend on their breed associations for records software, the commercial producers in the Alabama BCIA have the Red Wing cow-calf program.

Auburn Extension regional animal scientist Tommy Brown says, “The Red Wing program gives commercial

producers a system to rank the production of their cows. Some people think we're just trying to push heavy weaning weights, but we're looking at calving intervals, efficiency scores and recording beef output per acre."

Lovelady says, "It is a method of identifying and keeping the best animals so we can continually improve our herd."

While some of the larger producers like Lovelady have their own Red Wing program, the smaller producers, or those who don't have the computer training or equipment to run it, now have access to the same program through their county agent's office.

"It gives the producer a more personal, one-on-one view," Field says. "When the county agent gives the report back to the producer, they can go over it with them. It makes it more effective."

Field says Lovelady, who is a dealer for Red Wing, was invaluable. "Red Wing was designed as a private entity. Butch can get things set up like we need."

The Red Wing program also makes Extension-sponsored educational programs

like the Master Cattlemen's program even more meaningful.

"The BCIA section evaluates and improves on the principles you've learned through Master Cattlemen," Field says. "Producers can see where they are now and monitor what they've learned."

Educational role

BCIA also has its own educational programs and a quarterly newsletter to keep producers up-to-date.

While BCIA is going great guns, its success has not been a given. It has gone from the care of Auburn's Extension service to the Alabama Cattlemen's Association and is now back with the Extension service.

"We have a core group of commercial and purebred people who really see the benefit of it," says Rob Adams, BCIA past president. "There were also some Extension and university people who just wouldn't let it die."

Kriese-Anderson says, "The Alabama BCIA is made up of a group of really stubborn people. Hard-headedness has kept it going. In other states, rather than fight, they said the time for it is past."

"BCIA helps the purebred producers stay in touch with the commercial producers."

— Bob Adams

She adds, "We need to make sure we stay relevant."

They are. And then some.

"We're pushing to get our producers set for the future," Brown says. "We've got a pasture-to-rail program like a lot of other states, and that data can be tied to the BCIA cow records."

"We've got people who have [had] commercial pedigrees for 20 years and have EPDs on the bulls they use. When alliances start looking for source-verified cattle, cattle to fit a particular window, our producers have a piece of paper they can hand them with the information."

"We're helping our producers be at the forefront of the industry."

