

by Mark McCully
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Is breed complementarity still a thing?

I remember my introductory beef production classes in college, and I still have the textbooks. At the beginning of the genetics chapter was a lesson on beef breeds and the attributes of each. Exposing my age, this was in the late '80s and early '90s.

The British and Continental breeds were distinctly different. The British breeds were more moderate-sized and tended to be more maternal. The Continental breeds were larger, heavier muscled and tended to be more terminal. Not to mention there was quite a variation in color.

Beef Breeding 101 discussed the science and benefits of heterosis and using different breeds to complement each other, or “breed complementarity.” Use a British breed like Angus or Hereford for the maternal side and cross with a Continental breed like Simmental or Maine Anjou for terminal traits. While that made sense to me in the late 1980s, I question if “breed complementarity” is still as viable of a concept today. Should it instead be “genetic complementarity?”

Over the past two or three decades, the number of relevant beef breeds has decreased and many of the distinct breed differences have minimized or gone away entirely. Today, the Angus breed makes up 80% of the genetics of the U.S. cow herd and has genetics in nearly every other breed registry.

When I have discussed this topic in a presentation, I show a slide of nine black bulls of different breeds to illustrate this point. All nine can be found in major artificial insemination (AI) studs, but most cattlemen would be hard-pressed to identify their correct breeds. Secondly, those nine

bulls and their representative breeds are not much different in frame size, muscling, or overall type and kind. A registered animal from a different breed may not provide the diversity in genetics it once did.

How do your commercial bull customers ensure the genetics they buy “complement” their herd? It’s not as easy anymore as buying a different breed. Consequently, it’s more important than ever for commercial cattlemen to know what genetics they are buying and to have confidence in the tools to help them select those that best complement their herds.


The use of expected progeny differences (EPDs) and genomics has allowed Angus breeders to make directional changes with far more speed and accuracy than in previous decades when visual appraisal was the only tool available. With more than 80 million phenotypic records and 1.3 million genotypes, breeders of registered Angus seedstock have led the charge — and commercial producers using those genetics have reaped the rewards.

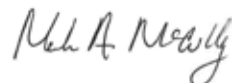
As Angus breeders you have seen what the USDA Meat Animal Research Center (USMARC) Germplasm Evaluation Program has documented. Angus calves have the heaviest weaning and yearling weights, outperforming the Continental breeds, all while excelling in marbling and quality grade. At

the same time, other breeders have increased focus on maternal traits by keeping downward pressure on mature size while selecting for fertility, longevity, mothering ability and efficiency.

In my mind, profitable beef production still all comes down to balance. Keeping a strong maternal base to the commercial herd where cows get bred early, have strong mothering ability and stay in the herd for a long time is vital. Producing a large pay weight of valuable pounds that work for the feeder, packer, purveyor and consumer is a crucial component of the profit equation.

While “breed complementarity” was a solid concept in its day, with many breeds becoming more homogenous and a significant advancement in the tools and technology available to describe genetic merit, we should probably be thinking more about “genetic complementarity.”

Commercial producers can complement their genetics by using EPDs and \$Values to find registered Angus cattle that contribute both the maternal and terminal traits needed to reach their goals. Their herd can be “Powered by AngusSM” and still find the diversity they need for a surefire breeding program to increase success and profits. 



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