

No-Nonsense Management

Dick Montague of Sunny Brook Ranch in California expects only the best from his Angus herd.

by Barbara LaBarbara

Dick Montague grew up in urban Southern California with a father who was a chemical engineer. Yet, for as long as he can remember, he wanted to be a cowboy.

Having the American Angus Association award Pathfinder status to six of his cows and being named 1991 Outstanding Seedstock Producer by the California Beef Cattle Improvement Association is a reflection of the no-nonsense kind of cowboy he has become.

In 1952 Montague graduated from Cal Poly with a degree in animal science. His first experience working with cattle came at college. He never looked back.

After graduation he and his wife, Doris moved to the state of Washington where their three children were born. He spent four years working on Hereford ranches there and returned to Southern California in 1956. His association with

Sunny Brook Ranch began in 1958.

The first owner of Sunny Brook was movie star Frank Morgan. He purchased the ranch land in the early 1940s and named it Sunny Brook because of his great fondness for Sunny Brook Whiskey.

Morgan started his herd by hiring Kenny Gross, former Western States Angus Association secretary, to buy cattle for the ranch. Gross went to the Midwest and returned with 15 outstanding Angus cows.

Garner L. Knox, who was with Utility Trailers for many years, purchased Sunny Brook in 1949.

Sunny Brook seemed to be made for Montague who fell in love with the Angus cattle. Yet he had hopes of returning to the San Luis Obispo area where he had attended college.

His dreams came true in 1961 when Knox purchased 800 acres near Paso Robles. Rolling hills, lush grasses, creeks and

ponds made Sunny Brook's new home a cowboy's paradise. Montague soon became a managing partner.

Today 100 registered Angus cows call Sunny Brook home. "We haven't purchased a cow since the '60s," says Montague. "Our cow herd actually goes back to 11 of the first 15 Gross bought."

Besides cattle, there are 300 acres of oat hay and 135 acres of alfalfa on the ranch. Half of the income of the ranch is suppose to come from hay sales. However, California's drought and increased costs of pumping water have caused a decline in hay production.

Twelve years ago Sunny Brook expanded into Nevada. They purchased 1,400 acres at Fallon and 4,700 acres in Smith Valley.

In 1990 Montague sold their commercial Angus herd at Fallon and leased out the land.

The Smith Valley Ranch has always been leased out. In the beginning it carried 850 commercial cows. Because of the drought, that number was reduced to 250 by 1990. In 1991 they were able to pasture 450 head. Snow pack and rainfall have a significant impact in that area.

Garner Knox died in 1984 leaving the ranch in a family trust. Montague says he actually works with the grandchildren now. He has total management responsibilities.

"Since Garner died, I have gotten really hard nosed," says Montague. "I have been working on fertility. If a cow doesn't have a calf, she's gone. I recently took a Pathfinder cow to market because she lost her calf."

He has a 16-year-old cow that continues to produce a better than average calf each year. As long as she does that, she can stay at Sunny Brook.

Another of Sunny Brook's Pathfinder cows has calved within the same week consistently for several years.

The heifers go through two heat cycles. If a heifer doesn't breed or calves 45 days late, he won't keep her. That is one of the reasons the herd's fertility has improved.

The herd's health problems are few because if they get sick, he gets rid of them.

Recently an employee asked why there was never anything wrong with the cattle. Montague told him it was simple, "If they get foot rot, they go down the road."

He has used artificial insemination since the early 1970s. He feels that was the beginning of major herd improvement for Sunny Brook. Using Rito and Wye breeding in the beginning improved the herd's fertility and temperament.

Today only 20 of the better cows are bred AI. Their offspring are generally used for replacement heifers and herd sires. He uses a bull he has raised to finish the breeding season.

Knox was using a performance program created at the University of California Davis when Montague went to work for him. After the move to Paso Robles, they used the California Beef Cattle Improvement Association's (CBCIA) program. He continues to use CBCIA and for more than 20 years has used the American Angus Association's AHIR program.

"That was a good move. The Angus Association has the best system in the country now," says Montague. "It is easy to use and I can compare my cows to cows all over the nation."

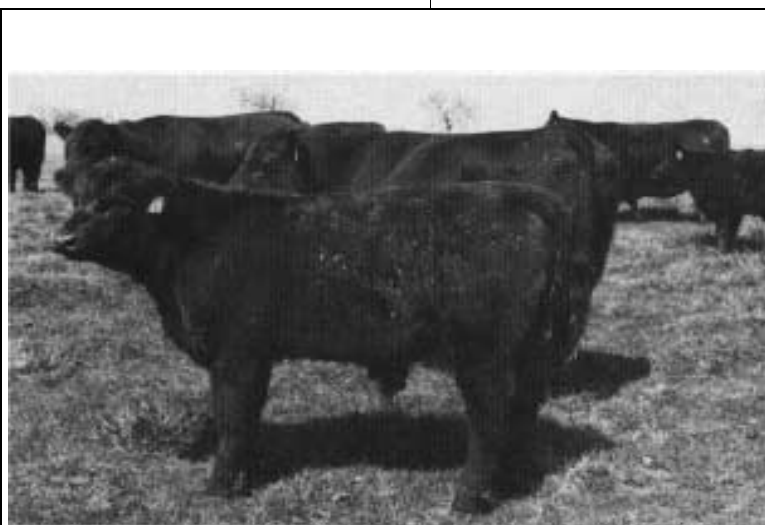
When the Angus herd started to change in the 1970s, he had to make a decision on which way to go. He chose light birth weights because most of the bulls from Sunny Brook are used on first calf heifers by commercial producers.

He evaluates potential AI herd sires on fertility, pelvic and frame scores and EPDs. His first criteria is a birth weight EPD of less than 1.75. He remembers when he first chose his bull perimeters the Association sent him a list of five

four more for himself and two for his neighbor. That kind of marketing integrity keeps the customer and Montague happy.

There is a good bull market in the Paso Robles area. Each year 40 to 50 bulls along with 25 to 30 heifers are sold at private treaty. Four heifers went out as 4-H projects this year.

Even though Montague uses performance extensively, he says most people don't buy cattle that way. However, his



A Sunnybrook Angus bull calf.

bulls. He was amazed there were so few. Today there is a broad selection.

Even though he emphasizes light birth weights he has increased weaning weights by more than 30 percent and yearling weights by nearly 40 percent. His weaning weights average 650 pounds for bulls and 575 for heifers, with an average birth weight of 74 pounds.

"Over the last 20 years I have worked hard to keep birth weights down and production up," he says.

He calves within 60 days in the fall and has one contemporary group. Years ago when he showed cattle, he had three. He says having one group makes record-keeping easier and the operation more efficient.

Besides no-nonsense management, Montague believes being honest with his customers has made the ranch successful.

Recently when one of his customers was unhappy with a bull he bought, Montague told him to bring it back. The customer brought the bull back, purchased

customers know he uses them and it adds credibility."

A high percent of repeat buyers is evidence of his goal to have satisfied customers.

This tall, slender cowboy smiles and says, "Even though people keep asking, I never think of retiring. I want the Knox family to see the Sunny Brook herd celebrate 50 years. That will be in 1999. After that I don't know."

His wife, Doris, has plans for them though. Two years ago they bought an old opera house in the northern California town of Montague (named for a distant relative). The opera house is now a restaurant/cookie shop, which Doris operates from Memorial Day through October. She hopes to convince Dick to retire there after he sees the golden anniversary of the herd.

For at least the next seven years you can expect to see more outstanding cattle from Sunny Brook Ranch and Dick Montague.

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