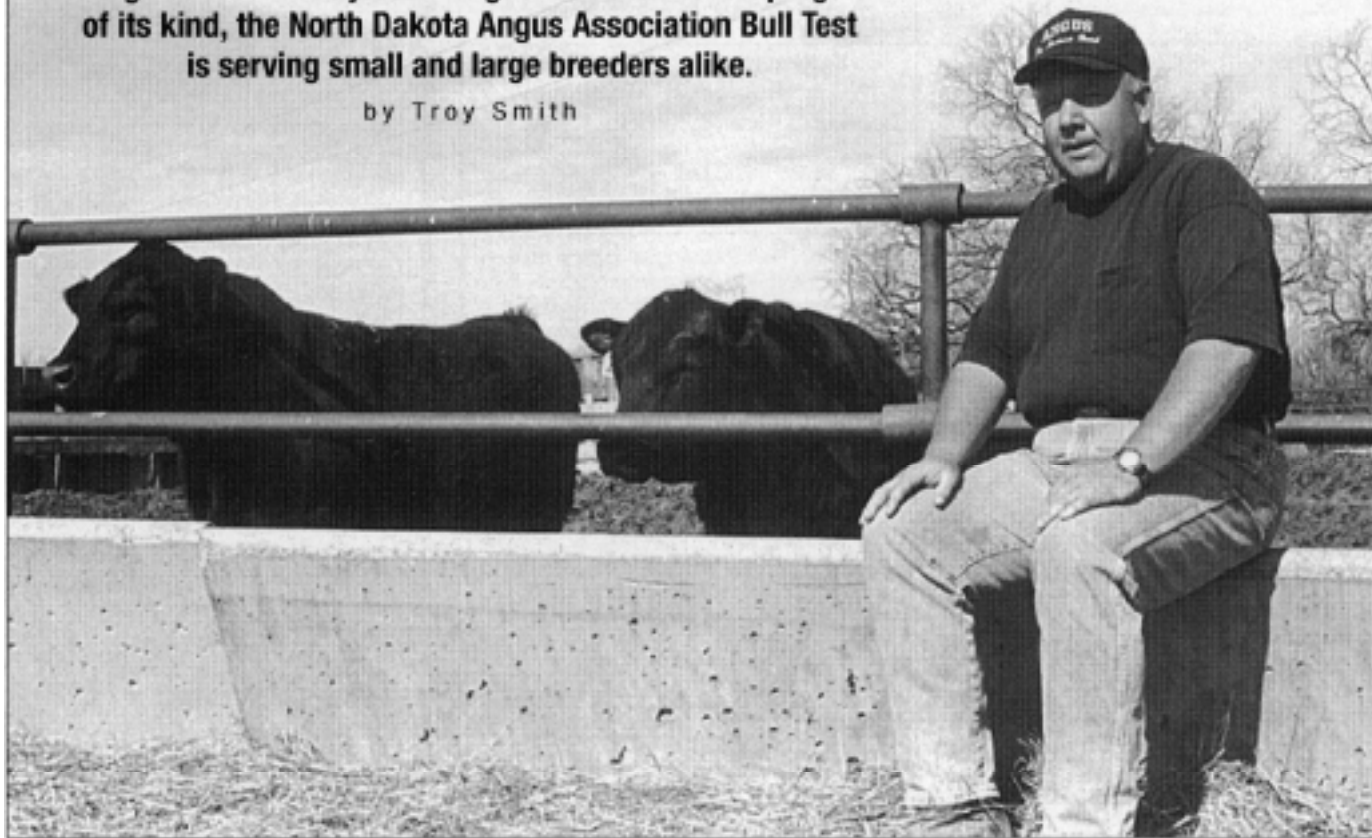


ONE OF A KIND

Thought to be the only state Angus association-run program of its kind, the North Dakota Angus Association Bull Test is serving small and large breeders alike.

by Troy Smith



(Above) The North Dakota Angus Association Bull Test at Dickinson has enhanced the market for performance bulls from large and small herds and has rejuvenated interest in the state association. Bob White, Bowman, is currently chairman of the test.



Most of a decade has passed since a small group of breeders launched the first North Dakota Angus Association Bull Test and Sale at Dickinson. And most of those breeders represented reputable Angus herds whose marketing programs were driven by well-established production sales. They really didn't need a bull test to merchandise their cattle. However, they did recognize the need to focus a spotlight on North Dakota's Angus cattle, and particularly performance cattle.

Taking a leadership role was Steve Brooks whose family operates a successful seedstock operation near Bowman. Brooks believed the bull test concept could promote performance Angus while providing another marketing avenue for small breeders who depended primarily upon

private treaty sales. He hoped the availability of a performance bull test program would encourage more small breeders to participate in the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program. And he hoped the new project would bring new and renewed interest in the North Dakota Angus Association.

"There were quite a few smaller herds that were producing some pretty good cattle, but the breeders weren't getting enough money for them. A bull test looked like a way to promote the good performers," says Brooks. "The test was open to members of the state association, but AHIR records were mandatory. We wanted all herds involved to be keeping good records and sending them in to the (American Angus) Association and getting expected progeny differences (EPDs)."

Brooks and other proponents hit the road to drum up support and consignments for the bull test. Ironically, most small breeders turned a cold shoulder to an invitation to participate.

"I think we contacted every state member and some non-members and asked them to consign a bull or two," remembers Brooks. "But it was hard to get them interested. Most objected to the cost and especially the cost of advertising. They weren't used to spending much money for promotion, but we knew we had to advertise."

Others declined, saying they might be more interested in a haltered, fitted and judged event involving a show and sale, but Brooks and other organizers hung fast to the notion of a performance-driven test.

"As it turned out, the people that didn't need it were the ones that got the thing started,"

Brooks adds. "For the first two years, most of the bulls came from bigger or at least well-established breeders. They made it work until others saw that it would work and decided to come on board."

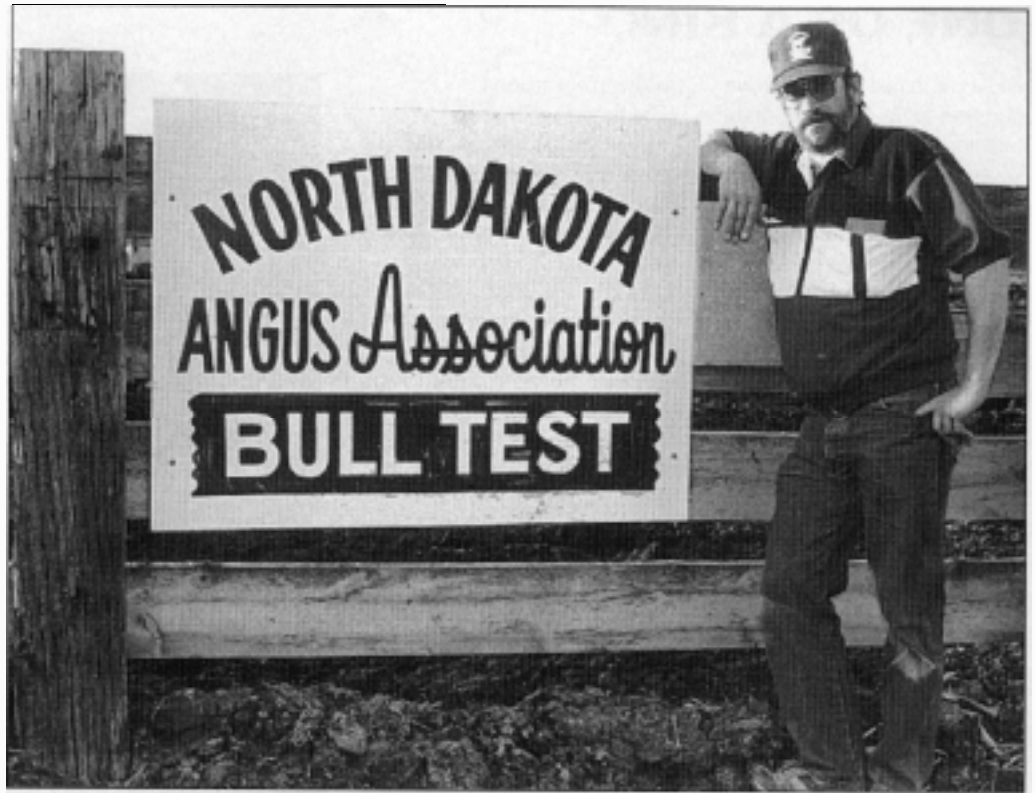
Gladstone breeder Dale Luhman liked the idea from the start and was a supporter of the first test and sale. When a committee was formed to plan for the program's second year, Luhman was named chairman and remained at the helm for five years.

"I always had believed in performance testing and the AHIR program," says Luhman. "I had followed the Midland Bull Test in Montana for quite a while and I liked the idea of having our own Angus test headquartered in western North Dakota. But the first two years were tough. It wasn't until the third year that the thing took off."

It was Luhman who scouted Ridl Farms Feedlot, located near Dickinson, as the test site. Despite some consignors' differing opinions regarding rations, the relationship with Ridl Farms has been a good one.

"All through the years we've heard from consignors who want to feed the bulls harder," Luhman adds. "But the test committee decided early that this was to be a vehicle to market performance bulls, not just a gain contest. Actually, we've backed off from the first couple of years. We shortened the test period from 140 days to 112 and for quite awhile our gain goal has been 3.0 to 3.5 pounds per day."

Luhman says the test committee meets with Ridl Farms each September to review the previous year's results and discuss possible improvements to rations and feeding methods. Over the years, the most favored ration has included a half-and-half grain mix of oats and corn, plus some silage and hay. The



The test is held each year at Ridl Farms Feedlot near Dickinson, Gladstone, N.D., Angus breeder, Dale Luhman, chaired the bull test committee for five years and helped foster the relationship between Ridl and NDAA.

health program is simple, but includes deworming the bulls twice. Luhman recalls only three bulls lost out of nearly 700 bulls tested during the last nine years.

"We've tried to keep the costs down," Luhman adds. "I don't think the total of test and sale costs have ever exceeded \$600 per bull. That includes advertising. Even for my own production sale, I figure \$100 per bull is a bare minimum to spend for advertising alone. So I think \$600 for the whole program isn't bad at all."

During his watch, Luhman initiated an effort to contact sale customers and solicit feedback about how test bulls held up under working conditions. Input from the buying public allowed for some subtle fine-tuning of the test and helped consignors better evaluate their individual programs.

"I think we owe the buyers some customer service anyway," offers Luhman. "We'd better

listen to what they have to say. And the personal contact is appreciated. It really helps keep buyers interested and coming back to the sale."

Before Luhman stepped down as chairman, he helped usher in a feature uncommon to other bull test sales. A commercial heifer division was added to help previous test-sale customers market their heifers. Heifer consignors may offer pens of five to nine head, or pens of 10 and more. The pens are evaluated publicly by a noted cattleman and offered for sale prior to the test bulls. It has been hard to gather up enough heifers to meet demand, but prices have been good and Luhman believes adding heifers certainly has enhanced the sale.

Luhman's successor, Bowman breeder Bob White, is starting his fourth year as chairman of the 7-member bull test committee. White's first year (1995) saw the program's

peak involvement, with 114 bulls entered. That was the year the committee decided to employ ultrasound technology to evaluate bulls for backfat ribeye area and marbling.

"We were out ahead of the troops a little bit and we created more questions than answers," admits White. "We should have educated buyers and some consignors more first. We haven't used ultrasound since, but I'm sure we will. Particularly as we get deeper into carcass EPDs, ultrasound evaluation will be more meaningful. Maybe we could create a sire-group comparison award for consignors when we go back to ultrasound."

An awards program adds competitive spirit to the bull test. Embroidered jackets are awarded to consignors of bulls ranking highest for weight per day of age, average daily gain,

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and a combined index. A jacket also goes to the consignor of the bull boasting the lowest birth weight.

During the early years, the bulls were divided into low and high birth weight divisions, using EPDs to make the cut. But because of varying accuracy's for EPD values, the committee decided that actual birth weight of bulls might divide the bulls more accurately and fairly. Today, 84 pounds is the maximum actual birth weight allowed for bulls in the low division.

Most other aspects of the bull test have changed little in recent years. Eligible bulls must have been born between Jan. 1 and April 15 of the entry year. Entries arrive at Ridl Farms about Nov. 10 for a warm-up period with the official weigh-in

taking place around Thanksgiving. In order to involve as many breeders as possible, consignors are limited to entering five bulls. After completion of the test, bulls with ratios of 90 or better qualify to sell, provided they pass a fertility test and breeding soundness exam. The sale is scheduled for the fourth Monday in April.

"It's held late to avoid stepping on individual breeders' toes," explains White. "It's one of the last sales of the season so it doesn't conflict with members' production sales."

White believes the bull test and sale has evolved into one of the North Dakota Angus Association's strongest events, ranking with the annual select female sale in Bismarck and the Valley City sale held in



The North Dakota Angus Association Bull Test was the brainchild of Steve Brooks whose family-owned Angus operation is located near Bowman.

conjunction with the North Dakota Winter Show.

"People look forward to it," White adds. "Our customer mailing list has more than 1,000 names and test sale buyers including both commercial and seedstock producers. Six bulls from the 1997 sale went into registered herds. That's been happening for awhile because the quality of consignments has continued to improve. Consignors can see that it pays to bring top-end bulls."

Recent years have seen a large number of catalogued bulls come from smaller herds. Particularly if they rely primarily on private treaty business, the test sale provides another marketing avenue, greater exposure for their programs and test information to influence breeding decisions. But most of

the long-established breeders still participate too. The test sale adds another facet to their respective marketing plans and they appreciate the added exposure and educational aspects.

“With buyers interested from Texas to Canada and Michigan to the West Coast, the bull test can be good for breeders of any size,” White says. “I think it’s doing what the organizers hoped it would do, including getting more people involved in the Association. It got me more involved and Dale Luhman too.”

Steve Brooks agrees that the success of the bull test and sale has rejuvenated interest in Association activities and he’s pleased that it prompted more breeders to look hard at performance.

“I think the bull test prompted 20 herds to get involved in AHIR and the gathering of EPDs. And I know participating in the test has

sells it for \$6,000 to \$8,000 into another registered herd, that makes the seller’s private treaty business better.”

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— Dale Luhman

really led to changes in several breeding programs,” Brooks says. “And when a small breeder brings one of his best bulls and

Last year’s test included 80 bulls from 37 consignors. The top 66 bulls sold for an average of \$2,318, with about 50 percent

going to repeat buyers. In addition, 222 commercial heifers averaged \$628.

Considering the cattle market in general, and last winter’s effect on the Northern Plains, Brooks and White think that was pretty respectable. Both anticipate bull test entries to be more than a 100 this year.

“It’s still hard to convince some breeders to bring some of their best bulls. But if they bring something less and it doesn’t perform well enough to make the sale, they learn,” says Brooks. “The good performers sell good, so the test sale averages higher than some area production sales. The buyers are happy and coming back for more, so I think we’re achieving our goals.”