



PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE MOWRY

South Dakota Angus breeder Steve Mowry is

No Longer Clowning Around

BY TROY SMITH

Like many purebred producers, Steve Mowry takes a calculated approach to producing seedstock. He and his wife, Deb, are methodically building a ranching operation while shifting their production emphasis from commercial cattle to registered Angus.

In a time when agricultural prospects for new or young producers are so challenging, the Mowrys are quite optimistic. They know what they want, and they have a pretty good idea about how they are going to get it.

Steve is plotting a careful course toward success as an Angus breeder, which does require cow savvy. In his former profession he had to read a critter's mind and respond with rapid reflexes and fancy footwork.

For more than a decade Steve followed the rodeo circuit as a clown and a bullfighter. Interestingly enough, it was his bullfighting prowess that helped launch Steve Mowry the bull breeder.

Growing up near Presho, S.D., Steve acquired his father's affinity for the cow business, but the lure of the rodeo arena was strong. Like many a high-school cowboy, he craved the adrenaline rush that came from climbing onto the backs of bucking bulls.

"I really wasn't much good at riding bulls, so I tried clowning," says Steve. "I guess you could say it was love at first fright, because I knew that was what I wanted to do."

Wearing greasepaint and baggy britches, Steve spent a couple of years paying his dues at the amateur level. He worked

up through the ranks of high school, college and all-Indian rodeos to shows sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA). From 1980 through 1989 he traveled the nation, working up to 150 pro-rodeo performances per year.

Steve's clowning career coincided with development of the Wrangler Bullfight Tour, which offered top professional cowboy protectors the chance to display their flair for fighting bulls during judged competitions at major rodeos.

It also offered considerable prize money to those judged most daring at teasing and toying with bad bovines. In the 1983 tour Steve claimed second place and a \$12,000 prize to supplement his pay for clowning. He put it into cows.

■ Calmer bovines

Steve continued to invest wages and winnings in cows he placed on shares with his dad. By the time Steve stopped "clowning around," he had accumulated 100 head of useful beef cows. Many were crossbred, however, and Steve soon decided to focus on a single breed.

"I worked awhile for a veterinarian in Chamberlain, so I went with him to work clients' cattle all around that part of the state. It gave me the chance to see lots of different operations and management styles," says Steve. "I became acquainted with the Glaus and Littau cattle, and that influenced my decision to concentrate on Angus. My first purebred females came from the Littau herd. I bought those in 1992 and later added some heifers from Koupal Angus near Wagner."

It also was through rodeo that Steve met his bride. Married in 1997, he and Deb set up housekeeping along the banks of the White River, south of Presho. They headquarter on a little ranch rented from Steve's dad and lease some additional grass and hay ground.

They manage 110 cows of which nearly 40 are registered.



TROY SMITH PHOTOS

Following a rodeo circuit courtship, Steve and Deb Mowry settled on a ranch near Presho, S.D., where they have added Angus seedstock production to their commercial cow-calf operation.

Slowly they are increasing the purebred emphasis, concentrating on quality and making extensive use of artificial insemination (AI).

"It's just a little 'Ma and Pa' operation — and we're even thinking about really naming it that. It'll be official soon enough since we're expecting a baby in November," grins Steve, who says he's not sure how the new baby will affect things.

"I really depend on Deb. She's a better cowgirl than I am a cowboy," he says. "She can do anything that I can do except AI, and she wants to learn that. Then she'll be able to do it all, but I still won't be able to bake like she can."

■ Using his cow savvy

Tailor-made to complement an AI program is the meadow just east of Mowry headquarters where cattle graze lush, cool-season forage for a prebreeding flush. Steve and Deb ride the herd twice a day during AI season, to heat-detect and breed replacement heifers and as many cows as possible for one cycle.

They learned early that sound, easy-access facilities enhance results. Steve admits their setup isn't fancy, just functional. With



Steve Mowry intensified his focus on breeding Angus through artificial insemination.

careful attention to nutrition, conception rates usually run 70%-75% overall.

Steve and Deb believe AI allows them to access top progeny-proven sires to accelerate their own genetic advancement. Steve says *balance* best describes what they are looking for in AI sires, calling solid maternal traits the foundation for a balanced genetic package.

"It's not hard to choose matings that will produce big bull calves, but it's harder to breed for heiferfemales that will make good cows, too," says Steve. "So I always consider what kind of female a mating should produce. It ought to be a commercial man's kind of cow — moderate for size, easy-fleshing and fertile.

"We study scrotal EPDs (expected progeny differences)

really hard. Bulls with high-accuracy numbers should have fertile daughters.

"You need growth, too, but we'd rather have it as weaning weight and yearling weight. Bull buyers here really scrutinize birth weights, and we don't want any over 100 pounds (lb.)," he adds. "Carcass merit is really important, and we're really trying to stress that, too."

After several years of using proven AI sires and their sons for cleanup, are there visible results? Well, Steve says he is raising fewer standout calves. That's a good thing. Instead of having an easily discernable top end, the overall quality is better throughout a more uniform calf crop.

"It's not so easy to pick replacement heifers now, but it's more fun," grins Steve.

As soon as the breeding season ends, the registered and commercial herds are thrown together, and the combined group is rotated through larger pastures during the summer.

Generally, weaning takes place during early November, and commercial calves are sold at the Presho auction. Cows continue on winter range with supplemental protein coming from lick tubs. As long as the weather permits, minimal hay is fed until just prior to and during calving.

Bull calves usually average around 625 lb. at weaning. They are started on a pelleted feed with a corncob base and later switched to a textured commercial feed. After 110 days, when the bulls are weighed, they have been eased up to about 10 lb. of feed per day. Usually, gains average just more than 3 lb./day.

A strong believer in plenty of exercise to develop sound bulls, Steve has designed a bull pen that he calls his racetrack. A long oval-shaped setup, it stretches about 300 yards from the barn area up a slope and onto a bench where the bulls



Mowry places considerable emphasis on the female side of the breeding equation. He says they ought to be a "commercial man's kind" of female; moderate for size, easy fleshing and fertile.

are fed. Steve says the bulls travel plenty of "laps" along that track, building muscle and sound feet and legs.

The Mowrys offer a few yearling bulls for sale each April through the Presho auction market. By that time the bulls are weighing about 1,100 lb.

"They're not real big bulls, but they're big enough. Deb and I fit them ourselves, with Dad's help," says Steve. "We sell a few commercial replacement heifers, too."

Sale heifers are developed along with the Mowrys' own replacements, turned out on meadow regrowth after Steve has taken a cutting of hay. Weighing around 550 lb. at weaning, the heifers receive corn and protein pellets plus supplemental grass-legume hay.

The target yearling weight for these moderate-frame heifers is 750-800 lb. Carried on with adequate nutrition, the heifers will weigh 1,000 lb. by the time they deliver their first calves.

■ Supplementing the ranch

The reality of running a relatively small herd means Steve and Deb have to seek supplemental income while building their cattle operation. Both have worked sale days at the local auction market, but they consider that an educational experience, too. Observing the cattle that come

through the market and visiting with consignors has helped them fine-tune their own trait-selection process. There's also the benefit of rubbing shoulders with potential bull customers.

The Mowrys also serve as day-workers on area ranches, trailering their horses to the neighbors to help move and process cattle. Some of this work is traded for custom haying a neighbor does for the Mowrys. Consequently, the couple doesn't have to own and maintain expensive hay-harvesting equipment.

Deb finds seasonal work on Medicine Creek Pheasant Ranch, where game birds are raised and released for organized hunts. This past summer both she and Steve hired on to perform maintenance duties at the rest stops along a stretch of nearby Interstate 90.

"How many people do you know [who] would tend toilets so they can stay in the cow business?" jokes Steve. "But it's worth it to keep our ranch progressing. I don't plan to do it this way forever. We're looking forward to the day when these cows will take care of us."

Steve and Deb have established a set of goals for their cattle operation. Steve has started offering custom AI services for a few area cattlemen. Particularly if Deb

becomes a proficient technician, they would like to expand that professional service. They are continuing to increase emphasis on the purebred enterprise, working toward optimum use of resources and looking forward to more vertical integration.

"We are trying to stress the efficiency of the cow as forage harvester. To make better use of our seasonal grasses, we're trying to step up our planned rotational grazing. The cows have to fit our resources; not the other way around," explains Steve. "We have great hunting here for pheasant and both whitetail and mule deer, so we host some hunters. That's a resource we have to use wisely, too."

"Right now, we lease all of the ground we operate on. We plan to continue building cattle numbers and then turn some cattle into land," Steve adds. "And we want to retain ownership of at least part of our feeder cattle all the way to finish. We need the performance and carcass data on our herd, and the day is coming fast when bull customers will demand that kind of information."

While Steve is striving to become a full-time rancher, with seedstock production as the primary enterprise, Deb says he couldn't turn down the local rodeo promoters when they asked him to don paint and costume for the local Fourth of July celebration. They wanted him to "clown" for the little kids' sheep-riding event billed as mutton-bustin'.

It sounds pretty tame for a fellow who used to make his living side-stepping charging bulls and thrilling the crowd by jumping over them.

"I just don't know," muses Deb. "I've seen him trip and fall down while trying to jump over a bucket calf. Maybe he'd better stick to raising bulls now."