The Role Model's Role Model

A Tennessee producer's replacement-heifer program sets the bar for an Extension specialist.

Story & photos by ***Becky Mills***

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When producers need advice about their cattle operations, they often turn to the Extension service. Morgan Jones is usually first in line. But the Sweetwater, Tenn., commercial producer is so adept at putting the advice to work that now the state Extension beef specialist follows Jones's example.

"He has been the role model for my small herd," says Warren Gill, University of Tennessee Extension animal scientist. "I've followed his program for several years."

Two years ago, the Nashville-based specialist even put his money behind his statement and bought 12 Angus-based replacement heifers from Jones.

Gill says the steps to Jones's enviable replacement-heifer program aren't hard to duplicate.

Willing attitude

"No. 1, he has a willingness to step back and look at his program," Gill says.

In the '80s, Jones had a base herd of commercial Herefords. "He liked his white-faced cows, but they just weren't selling very well," Gill says.

Now, with the addition of Angus bulls to his program, the steers from Jones's 125-cow black and black-baldie herd are hot commodities at the graded feeder-calf sales at the nearby livestock sales facility. As for the females, Gill reports, "By the early '90s, he was known as one of the best sources of replacement heifers in the area."

Even though special replacement-heifer sales are no longer conducted at the facility, Jones has no trouble selling his extra heifers by private treaty.

Quality-driven sire selection

"No. 2 is careful bull selection, followed by careful selection of replacement heifers," Gill says. "Jones buys performance-tested bulls and takes recommendations from Bob Sliger, his county agent."

"Sliger is a practical geneticist. He knows how to pick a bull," Gill adds.

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Actually, the first attempt at selecting Angus bulls didn't go well. When Jones and Sliger chose the first Angus bull for the herd, expected progeny differences (EPDs) weren't in common use. "I had to pull a calf, and it was dead," Jones reports. "I told Sliger, 'If I can't beat this, I'd just as soon have a Jersey.'"

Thankfully, he and Sliger gave Angus bulls a second chance.

"That was 12 years ago. We went about putting together the best black cattle we could find," Jones states. "Angus has more data and more information for what I'm trying to put together — quality."

Gill agrees. "The Angus breed does a great job in having bulls that a commercial producer like Jones can use," he says.

Through a bull-leasing program offered by a local bank, Jones added artificial insemination (AI)-sired sons of some popular Angus bulls to his program.

The bulls have to do more than look good and have a famous sire. "I try to mate for performance, milk and frame score," Jones says. "I really strive for milk. I try to stay in the plus 18- to 20-pound (lb.) range."

Calving ease is still a major factor in his selection program. "I'm not interested in pulling a lot of calves. I like to find them up and sucking," he states.

Carcass traits also have entered into his selection decisions. "I'm now looking for marbling, ribeye and fat thickness," Jones says. Because of his emphasis on

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►**Morgan Jones collects 205-day weights when calves have had nothing to eat but pasture and their dams' milk. Then he puts a creep feeder in the pasture for 30 days so steers and heifers will be comfortable eating ground feed before they are weaned.**

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No need for a head start

Morgan Jones usually goes strictly by the book when it comes to raising his top-notch replacement heifers. But when it comes to scheduling their first calf, he tosses the book aside. While most producers breed their replacement heifers to calve before their mature cows so they'll have more time to rebreed and still fit with the herd, Jones breeds his heifers to calve after his December- and January-calving mature herd.

"I breed my heifers to calve in February and March when the pasture is more lush," says the commercial producer. "They handle it well. I can back them up."

Tennessee Extension animal scientist Warren Gill says there is a ready explanation for Jones's success with the unique management strategy. "Morgan Jones is an even better forage manager than he is a cattle manager," Gill states.

By February, Jones's rye and ryegrass pastures are taking off; and, with a decent winter, the fescue and clover are greening up. By the time the bulls go in the first part of May, the first-calf heifers have had enough high-quality forage to milk, to continue growing and to rebreed.

Still, Gill says this isn't a practice for most producers. He should know. After buying 12 replacement heifers from Jones, he got caught with three open heifers when they tried to rebreed after their first calf.

"There is a lesson here," Gill says. "You've got to match those first-calf heifers with their environments. If you are putting enough milk out there to get good calves and not putting enough groceries in front of the heifers, you'll get open heifers."

University of Minnesota Extension animal scientist Cliff Lamb also says Jones's breeding and calving schedule is risky business for the average producer.

"It works extremely well if it is a well-managed system, but there is not a lot of room for error," Lamb warns.

"It is asking a lot for a first-calf heifer to get pregnant 30 to 60 days after she gives birth. In the first 21 days after calving, cyclicity can drop to 50% to 55% in first-calf heifers, while it ranges from 70% to 95% in mature cows," he explains.

To make it work, Lamb says the heifers need to be in a 5.5 body condition score (BCS) — on a scale from 1 to 9, with 1 being emaciated and 9 being obese — at calving, then have plenty of high-quality forage in front of them when they do calve.

"Jones is obviously a proactive, thinking producer. And this is a system he has worked extremely hard at," Lamb says. "I don't think a lot of producers are prepared to make the sacrifices to make this system work."

"If anything goes wrong, you aren't going to get them rebred. Then you'll either need to hold an open cow over or cull really good cows," he adds.

But, as Gill says, especially when talking about a producer the caliber of Jones, "Everything the book says doesn't apply in every recommendation."

performance and carcass traits, many of his steers are purchased for the quality-driven Nebraska Corn-Fed Beef™ program.

Heifers earn their keep

Jones is equally conscientious when it comes to heifer selection. "Anything that isn't doing 2 pounds a day off their mothers we ship out and try to get their mothers out, too," he states.

Jones, who is enrolled in the Tennessee Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA), takes the 205-day weights when the calves have had nothing to eat but pasture and their dams' milk. Then he puts a creep feeder in the pasture for 30 days so steers and heifers will be comfortable eating ground feed before they are weaned. In his herd, 700-lb. steer calves are not uncommon at weaning.

At weaning, he separates the calves by sex, deworms them and gives them their third round of vaccinations, which start in April, when they are still baby calves. This gives the heifers a healthy start and makes them eligible for special Southeastern Pride feeder-calf sales if they don't make the cut as replacements.

The weaned heifers then get a 14%-protein feed for 30 days. Next, they are turned out on fescue, clover and hay, but they continue to get the grain at the daily rate of 1% of body weight per head.

When Jones weans his cattle, he also buys the top end of the heifers from another Monroe County producer, Ralph Best. Jones and Best are on a similar breeding and management program, so the purchased and home-raised heifers are almost identical. With Best's heifers, as well as his own, Jones normally develops about 50-55 heifers/year.

By November or December, his rye and ryegrass are ready to graze, and the heifers move onto them, continuing to receive small amounts of the high-protein feed.

"In March, I pull them in and eyeball them," Jones says. "I pull out 20 and sell them by private treaty or through the feeder-calf sale."

The bull goes out with the rest of the heifers for 60 days, and the grain stops. Conception rates are not a problem with the growthy heifers. In 2001, 29 of 31 settled.

When the heifers calve the following February or March, they are turned in with the mature cows, where they continue to earn their keep.

"The conception rate for the mature cows runs around 95% on a 75-day season," Sliger reports. "Close to 90% of the calves are born in the first 45 days."

An enthusiastic Gill concludes, "I think the world of that type of program."