

► Angus influence can be found throughout the course, from a statue of a black cow-calf pair to the golf balls and hats. Even the green at hole No. 2 is in the shape of an Angus steer head.

Tee Time on the Back Forty

An Illinois
cow-calf operation
gives birth to a different
Angus venture.

by Barb Baylor Anderson

As you gaze across the Angus Links Golf Course near Windsor, Ill., you can still imagine black cows grazing on the hills, with the barns and silo as their backdrop. The buildings and Mac and Phyllis Sexson's home still rest at the edge of the course, but their pastures have been replaced with turf, and their showsticks with golf clubs.

"The ground is as suited for golf as it is for cattle. The hills and light soils made the ground tough to farm," says Sudy Shafer, one of Mac and Phyllis's daughters.

Sudy, together with her sister Sharla Hooten and cousin Rod Maxwell, established an LLC to create the course from the adjoining Sexson and Maxwell properties in the late 1990s. The trio opened the front nine holes in May of 1998 and the back nine in June 1999.

"Rod is an avid golfer and came up with the idea," Sudy continues. "So we did our research and learned there are not many public courses in this area, but there are several cities close by and expanding regional tourism."

The cousins took the idea to Mac, who decided to retire and transfer the farm to his daughters. "I figured I can help the girls now rather than later," Mac says. "It was getting tough for me to manage the cattle."

Tied to Angus

The effort to keep the course tied in with the Angus industry helped sell Mac on the idea as well. From the statue of the black cow-calf pair at one end of the course to the scorecards, golf balls, hats and golf cart keys, the Angus influence can be found throughout the course. Even the Hole No. 2 green is in the shape of an Angus steer head.

"The barn has become our maintenance building, and we

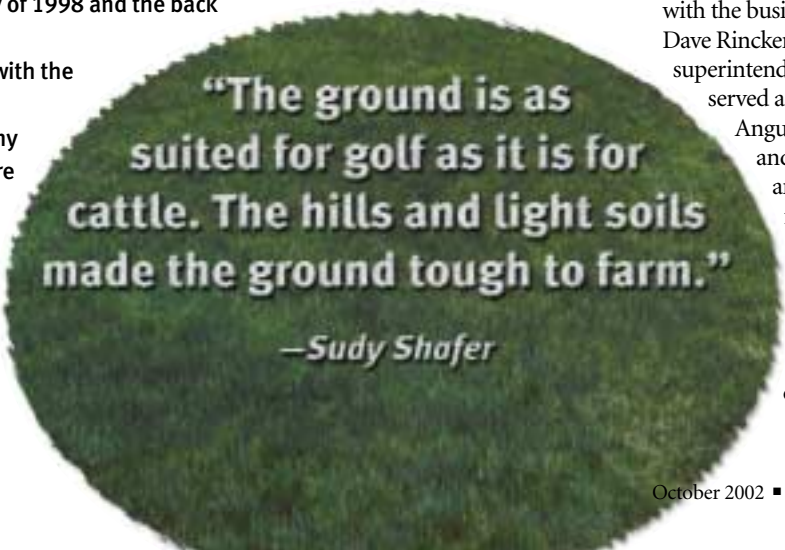
grow our own sod in an area behind the buildings," Sudy says.

"We stuck with the Angus theme because so many local people commented how much they missed the black cows. Our ag theme also draws farm and agribusiness groups for field days. And when out-of-towners ask about the course name, we have the opportunity to spread some Angus goodwill."

The Angus Links owners have also kept local farmers involved with the business, including Dave Rincker, the golf course's superintendent. Rincker has served as a leader in Illinois Angus circles for years, and he still maintains an interest in his family's Angus business.

"Local support has been tremendous, especially since we did most of the

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work ourselves,” Sharla says. “We had a local bulldozer company come in and move dirt when necessary, but we pretty much built the place by hand. We hauled sand, gravel and laid out drainage. Before we had irrigation, people would bring in loads of water and help us hand-water the course, sometimes twice a day.”

It takes work

Now in their third season, the owners hope to improve cart paths and make plans to expand the pro shop. While both Sudy and Sharla agree they’d love to serve *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) at some point, the current kitchen structure and health department regulations will not allow it.


“A golf course is not much different than farming. Something always needs to be done,” Sharla says. “If we had it to do over again, we’re not sure we would unless we

were younger. At the same time, if you don’t do something you are interested in, you may regret it later on.”

Angus Links is open all year, weather permitting, and draws golfers from Chicago to southern Illinois and points in between. Once city water becomes available in the area, Angus Links owners have plans for an eight-acre subdivision adjoining the course and a waiting list of residents.

“I look out the window at the course now and realize our range is now used for driving balls, not cattle, and we grow grass, not corn,” says Mac. “But the Angus tradition is alive here. We’ve had a good ride.”

Mac is right. As you gaze across the grounds, you can see the Angus heritage is very much a part of this operation.

Call (217) 459-2805 for tee times and greens fees. 



► Phyllis and Mac Sexson show a picture of their original farm before the golf course was added. “I look out the window at the course now and realize our range is now used for driving balls, not cattle, and we grow grass, not corn,” Mac says.

A winner’s mentality

Just as golfers at Angus Links strive to limit club strokes, Mac Sexson strove with every cow to raise top Angus calves. Mac believed selecting the right genetics was the way to achieve success on his Angus scorecard.

“I first became interested in Angus production in the mid-1960s when I worked for an operation that had Angus,” Mac relates. “I decided I wanted to do that myself.”

Mac purchased the farm, where the course is today, in 1967. He bought his first cows from the Tomlinson family near West Frankfort, Ill. Soon thereafter, he befriended Jim Scott from Triple S Farm and learned artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET) procedures so he could introduce genetics from top bulls. He relied on the breeding of Tree Lane Farms and Dameron Angus.

When Mac liquidated the herd in the mid-1990s, he sent some of the best cows to his granddaughter’s operation.

“Grandpa always took the kids, Andy and Marc Hooten and Lori (Shafer) Bennett, to the shows,” Phyllis says. “Our grandson Andy had the reserve carcass steer in Indianapolis in 1987, and our granddaughter Lori stood third in class in Louisville in 1989. Lori has the cows now, and is continuing our Angus heritage.”

Converted pasture plays well in Peoria

Angus Links is not the only pasture that has been converted to a golf course in Illinois in the last decade. The nationally recognized WeaverRidge Golf Club and residential community sits on 370 acres where Angus cattle once grazed.

“We acquired the farmland in the 1970s and 1980s, knowing that Peoria would grow,” says Jerry Weaver, who manages WeaverRidge



and has family ties to Weaver Angus Farm of Peoria. “The property already had access to city water and utilities, and we intended to eventually develop it. We had already built one subdivision, so when a potential buyer who wanted to develop a golf community here backed out, we decided to put in the community ourselves.”

About 150 acres of the property houses 310 home lots and condominiums. The other 220 acres contains the course.

“The property has a 150-foot grade, which is unusual for Illinois. The course has seven miles of concrete cart paths,” Weaver says.

WeaverRidge opened in 1997 and was rated second-best new upscale course in 1998 by *Golf Digest*. Today, the course is recognized by *Golf Digest* as one of the 201 best public-access courses in North America. It is the highest-ranked course in Illinois outside the Chicago area. The course is also considered a

destination golf course because it draws more than 50% of its guests from outside the greater Peoria area.

The 33,000-square-foot clubhouse, its bar and cabinets are trimmed with walnut from trees removed from the property during construction. The clubhouse can, and most often does, accommodate two wedding receptions on the weekends in its two large rooms, and also serves as a site for area meetings, seminars, golf outings and fund-raisers. The grill and pro shop are also housed in the building.

“When we started this project, I really had no interest in golf. The first time I golfed 18 holes was the day before the course opened,” Weaver says. “But this was the way to best maximize the value of this property.”

WeaverRidge greens fees are \$73, plus \$15 for a cart. For more information, visit www.weaveridge.com.