

As an official test herd for the Association's Sire Evaluation Program, Ballaghs A.I. some 500 cows to top young performance sires. The turnaround in their herd has made it worth the extra efforts.

Sandhills and Sire Evaluation

Those Ballagh Boys Make It Pay

by Nancy Ann Sayre

The progress is easy to see—in the pastures, at the scales, on the records, across the bottom line.

With virtually no cash outlay, the Ballaghs are weaning more pounds, demanding a premium on those pounds and building a herd of commercial and registered Angus that they could not buy anywhere.

A willingness and determination to use every available resource in the sandhills of central Nebraska has been the key to their progress, but the herd's recent turnaround has been a direct response to Ballaghs' involvement in the American Angus Assn.'s structured Sire Evaluation Program. As an official test herd for that program, they have sampled top young performance sires since 1978. The payoff has been well worth their extra efforts.

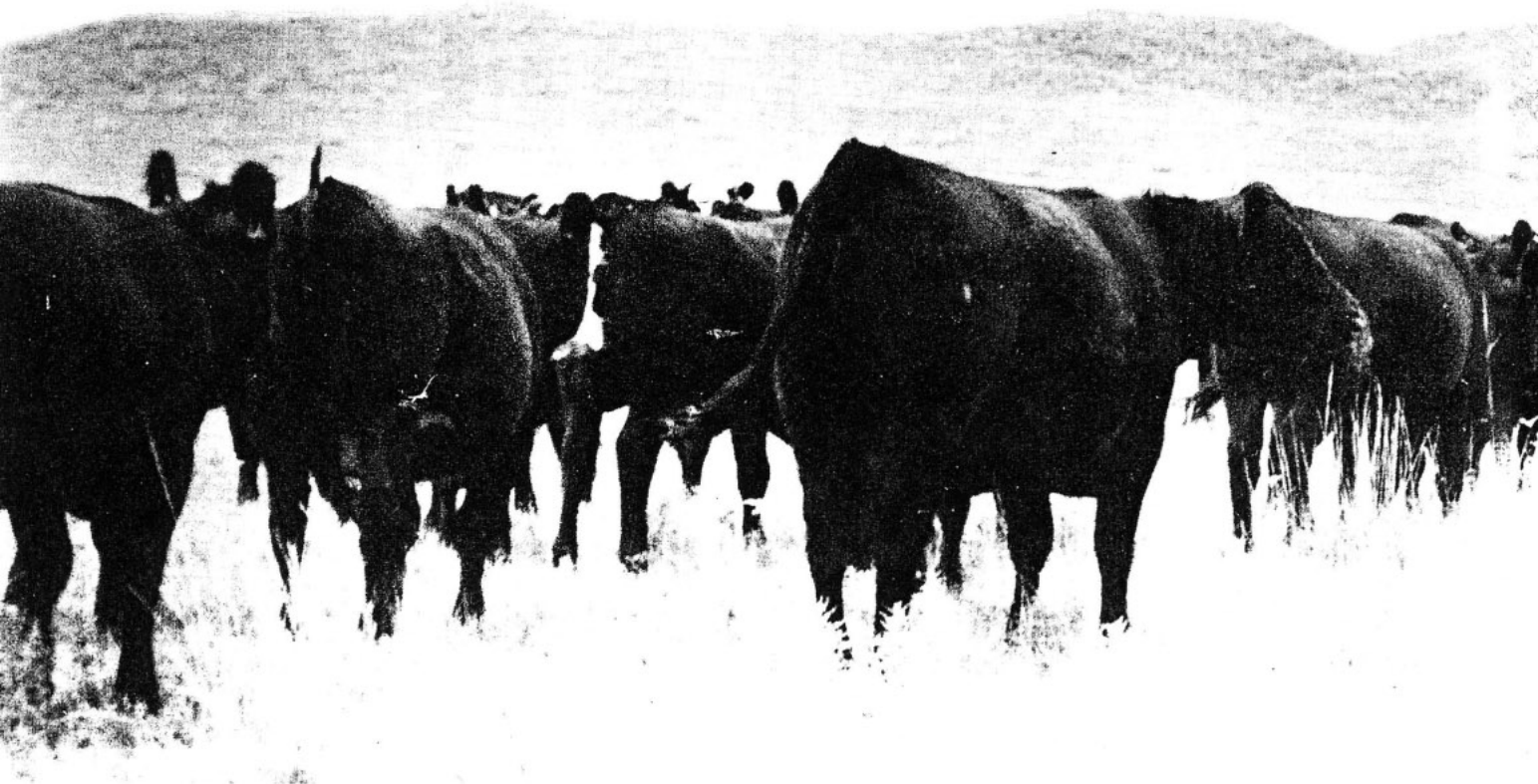
"The extra money we get from the steers is nice, but there's where we're really getting the most fringe benefits—in those replacement heifers."

"Seemed like we never had enough good replacement heifers of our own before. We went out and bought a few good black cows. Now we're going the other way—we have more good heifers than we can use. After four or five years on this program it's hard to buy heifers better than what we have."

"We used to crossbreed (Angus and Hereford) to get the size we needed, yet we are doing the same thing now with straightbreds on this program . . . with selection and the right kind of sire."

"And the records have been a big help in knowing what you have and in being able to tell people what they are."

Comments such as these come naturally to Lynn Ballagh, his father Gordon and brother Rowan when they talk about the changes in their herd these past years. Those same statements also sum up many of the strengths of the sire evaluation program.



The purpose of the designed sire evaluation test is to gather performance figures on the progeny of a bull in order to estimate his genetic potential as a sire. Cows must be randomly mated to breeder-owned test sires and Association-recommended reference sires (for unbiased results compared to a known sire). Twenty progeny of each bull are needed for the program; they are evaluated with regard to birth weight, weaning weight, yearling weight and carcass data. The resulting information is then published in the annual Sire Evaluation Report.

To assure that information used in the report is valuable to those Angus breeders who use it, requirements for an official test herd are demanding. Better than 100 cows (of any breed) must be A.I.'d and managed under uniform conditions; accurate records must be maintained; and steers must be traced to slaughter. A breeder's calf crop is determined by the random use of those sires he tests and the breeder is committed to a strict management program.

The Ballagh Ranch, near Burwell, certainly qualified to participate as a test herd. Superior, yet practical management has been the norm there. When the opportunity arose to use some top Angus bulls, they were ready to give it a try.

At that point (five years ago), Ballaghs had recorded weights on calves one year, but they had their cattle identified and had used some performance tested sires. Positive results had them ready to take stronger steps in that direction. Lynn believed in weights and records as a means of selection and had just completed A.I. school. (He had taken the course mainly for a lesson in pregnancy checking, but became convinced of the potential value of A.I. in their program.)

The sire evaluation program provided the chance to put some top Angus genetics to work in their herd right away—without any large expense. (Test sire semen is provided by the bull owner, reference sire semen cost is minimal.) In fact, with the cooperation of

owners of those bulls they were to test—Jorgensen Angus, Ideal, S.D., and Cammack Farms, De Witt, Neb.—Ballaghs worked out a system which was tailored to their operation and resources. That system has allowed them to take full advantage of the extra growth bred into young test bulls and reference sires. The results are reflected in their comments.

The System that Works for Them

Ballaghs enroll the majority of their commercial herd on the program. They tested two sires in 1978 and are currently testing five. Lynn does all the heat detecting and breeding himself. This past year he bred nearly 140 yearlings and 340 mature cows (those numbers include 80 registered head, but not the fall-calving group of 100 cows which are also A.I.'d).

Synchronization has helped in this successful A.I. program and Lynn firmly believes in it as a useful tool. He will comment, though, that it does not replace good management or A.I. practices. A single-injection method is used to synchronize heifers and works well. Within 11 days this past year Lynn bred all but 7 of the 145 replacement yearlings on standing heat.

Cows are bred over a 30-day period. They are kept close to the barns and fed a few pounds of corn each morning. This eases handling and heat detection for a one-man breeding system. Breeding must be random to comply with the designed test and records must be precise from the start.

Clean up bulls used in these pastures are proof of Ballagh's belief in the sire evaluation program and the figures it yields—bulls are purchased on their performance merit and are the best Ballaghs can afford. They come from

Jorgensen, Cammack or other known performance herds; many are half-sibs to the bulls being tested.

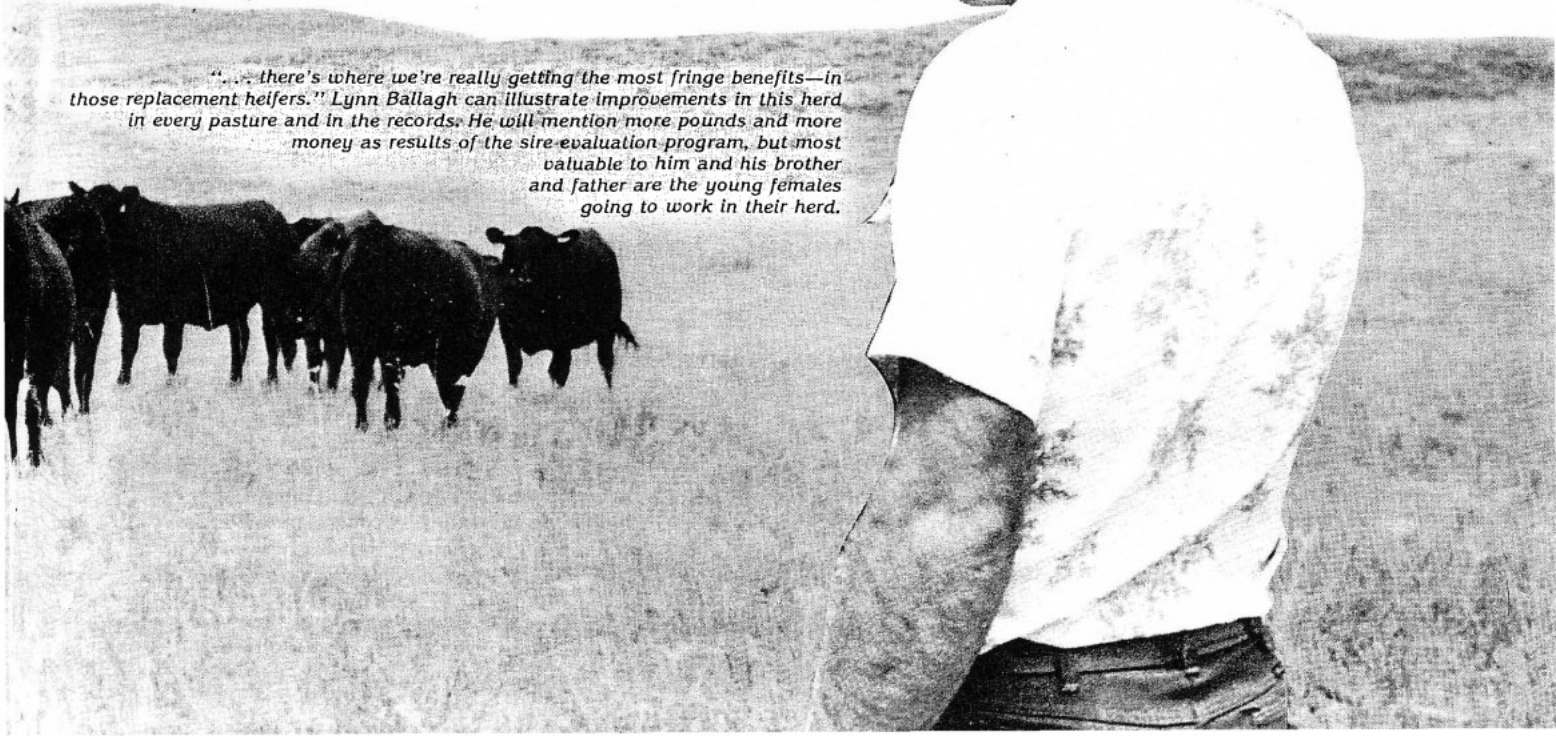
Calving season, the next step in this system, begins in mid-February and runs through May. Every calf is weighed and identified with a tag color-coded by sire group. A trip through the pastures shows that the Ballaghs know their cattle well. The partners take a sincere interest in the test sires and the progress of their progeny . . . but the cows do all the summer work in those pastures.

Pasture groups are sorted by calf sex. All steers are implanted for maximum growth, but the only calves that ever see a lick of creep feed are the steers sired by clean-up bulls. Since they are younger calves (and chances are they have less predictable growth bred in), the extra feed helps even them up with the A.I.-sired steers.

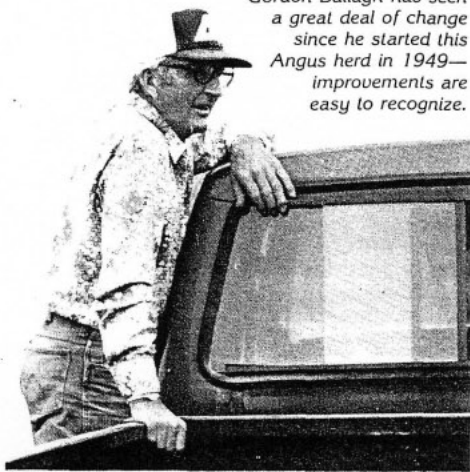
The clean-up steer calves are sold through a special black feeder calf sale at weaning, so every pound pays. The quality, uniformity and reputation of the calves pay too; they regularly draw top dollar from repeat buyers. And that top market price sets the basis for steers sired by test bulls. Jorgensen Angus buys the A.I. steers at a premium over the top local price and feeds them to slaughter. This works well for Ballaghs since they are not set up to finish cattle; they are guaranteed a top price and can follow the cattle

through carcass evaluation. The biggest problem? "Our steers by the test bulls averaged 585 lb. last year and you can sit at our local sale barns all day waiting for calves with that weight to come through. We just can't find cattle to average up to our calves so we can set a price." As for the heifers, Ballaghs keep the entire calf crop through yearling age

"... there's where we're really getting the most fringe benefits—in those replacement heifers." Lynn Ballagh can illustrate improvements in this herd in every pasture and in the records. He will mention more pounds and more money as results of the sire evaluation program, but most valuable to him and his brother and father are the young females going to work in their herd.



Gordon Ballagh has seen a great deal of change since he started this Angus herd in 1949—improvements are easy to recognize.



uniformity of the yearlings makes a real impression, and added information makes that impression stick.

"Look at these heifers," explains Lynn, "the fall calves have got a six month advantage and they're crossbreds, yet they really aren't very much bigger than our straight blacks by the A.I. sires."

Much more than a visual impression is demanded in this operation. Performance is the key and it includes everything from breeding early to calving regularly to raising a heavy calf each year. The records tell that story and they tell a convincing tale. Average weaning weights in the test herd jumped 50 lb. for steers and 20 lb. for heifers from 1979 to this past fall weigh day. A look at the weights turned in by cows weaning their first calf (that includes the first generation of test sire daughters in production) gives a hint of the progress yet to be made: Heifer calves averaged 535 lb. and steers tipped 585 lb., compared to 494-lb. and 575-lb. respective averages for the entire test group.

It's progress anyway you want to look at it—progress that is paying off. More pounds are weaned and those pounds are worth more over the scales; more importantly, superior genetics are going back into the herd to work for Ballaghs.

The results have brought about some changes in Ballaghs' original plan. Rather than using Hereford bulls on the fall-calving cows, they now breed to bulls which excel on the sire evaluation program. Until recently, Ballaghs bred the registered spring-calving cattle to a few selected sires and kept about 20 bull calves to sell locally. Now though, they plan their registered breeding program similarly to the commercial herd, using the test and reference sires.

"The bull market is a little tough around here and this program is working so well for us that we are just breeding the registered cows as part of the test herd. We end up with some awfully good registered heifers that way and steer all the bull calves," says Lynn.

The local bull market may be tough, but neighbors have noticed the changes at Ballagh Ranch. Many come to see what happens on weigh day during a get-together hosted for bull owners and interested breeders. Repeat demand for steers as well as culled heifers and cows also indicates respect for this program.

Going the Extra Mile

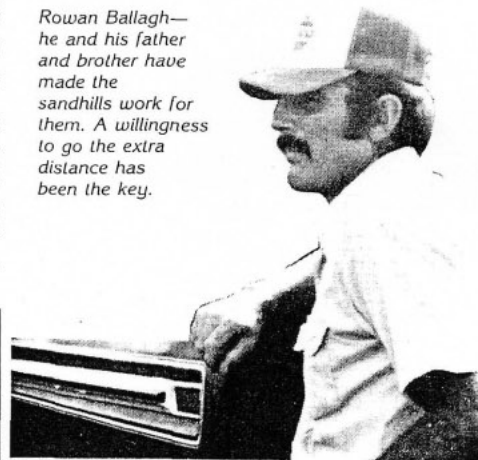
The progress has been tremendous, but it has taken some extra efforts. Inseminating nearly 500 cows, keeping a large percentage of young females and calving them to growthy bulls, and keeping accurate records through weaning is no small task for a commercially-oriented operator.

"You just about spend all day with the cows during breeding season. That's what it boils down to," remarks Lynn. "You're out there around 5:15 in the morning and make sure you're there at 9:30 or 10:00 at night. When I synchronize, I go ahead and check through the night."

He uses a motorcycle to heat detect and tallied about 6,000 miles last breeding season.

His attitude is the same at calving time; he likes to be there, especially with first-calvers. The young cows are an important part of the herd and a breeding program geared to maximum growth naturally leads to some big calves. The calving record at Ballaghs shows that they get the job done—losses are well below two percent in a herd of 600—and the extra growth pays off.

Rowan Ballagh—he and his father and brother have made the sandhills work for them. A willingness to go the extra distance has been the key.



and that suits them too. Heifers are not pushed for growth after weaning, but the record of that growth is important. Ballaghs' selection decisions consider both weaning and yearling records. Also, since Lynn knows the production records of his cows, the dam's history counts as well. Nearly all of the A.I.-sired heifers are kept and eye-appeal helps Lynn sort the bottom 20% of that group.

The Extras

The fact that the bottom fifth of the sire evaluation test heifers are considered for replacement indicates the genetic progress in motion here. Generations are turning over rapidly.

"The average age of our cow herd is coming down pretty fast now that we're on this program," says Lynn. "I imagine we'll turn them over in five or six years."

A look through the young cows in production, the yearling replacements and the heifer calves in the pastures give the reason for this. A look at recent weaning results does more convincing.

The young cows are workers—each has a big, growthy black calf at side—but then that is the only reason they are there. The



"After four or five years on this program it's hard to buy heifers better than what we have." This group of heifer calves are proof of the progress at Ballagh Ranch. No wonder generations are turning over rapidly.

When you take a herd with solid, practical management and cattle selected to pay their way, the foundation is good. Add to that a father and two sons who are willing to go the extra distance. Then add the genetics of some of the Angus breed's top young sires . . . progress is inevitable.

George Cammack commented, "You see all these things that you thought would work and they do—that's the exciting thing."

The results are no surprise, but they are exciting. Ask the Ballaghs about the benefits—they will mention the improvement in their herd, the heifers, the extra dollars and the people they have met. Then look to the pastures and the records for proof of the progress.

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