



*Dave and Sandy Umberger, 1991 BIF Commercial Producer of the Year.*

"Optimum production — not the maximum," has become a phrase to live by at Umberger Ranches, an Angus-based commercial cattle operation in northeastern Oregon.

It's a theory that Dave Umberger has learned through experience and is just now realizing the benefits.

Dave and his wife, Sandy, along with sons, Steve and John, and daughter, Julie, run their 780-cow operation from headquarters in Pendleton, Ore. Since being named Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Commercial Producer of the Year this past spring, the Umbargers have been hailed as a ranching success story for the '90s.

"I think there are a lot more people out there more deserving than we are," Umberger says, shrugging off the title. "We're just seeing some of the changes we've made pay off."

Dave is the third generation of Umbargers to raise cattle at the homeplace in Pendleton, but that legacy hasn't kept him from updating production and keeping an open mind. He is quick to thank others for the successes he's enjoyed, pointing to his two sons and Cliff Munson, a former ranch hand and current western states American Angus Association regional manager. "Without these guys' work things might have stayed the same," he says.

The main Umberger ranch was established 62 years ago in the foothills of the Blue Mountains in Umatilla County. What began as a home to Hereford cattle, mules and horses is now a commercial operation featuring mostly Angus and Angus-cross cows. The herd is complemented with cereal grain and alfalfa hay crops on about 2,075 acres. For pasture, the Umbargers utilize a 210-cow forest permit on the Starkey Unit, a 57,000-acre United States Forest Service experimental range, and 18,000 of privately owned mountain pasture.

The cow herd took a sharp turn in 1985 when bovine Trichomoniasis, a venereal reproductive disease, was discovered in their area.

## OPTING FOR THE OPTIMUM

*The Umberger Ranch has fine-tuned their commercial beef operation for optimum performance with Angus cattle and A.I.*

*Story and photos by Amy Lyons*



*(left) These two cowhands—Steve Umbarger and his pup—savor the morning sun before going out to do ranch chores.*

*(top) The Umbargers have steered their breeding program in the direction of production efficiency, maternal traits and improved carcass quality.*

"The threat of exposure had the potential for a production and economic disaster. However, the Umbargers capitalized on the opportunity to make several changes in their management," says Randy Mills, Umatilla County Extension agent.

After consulting veterinarians, nutritionists, agricultural lenders and Extension personnel, the Umbargers shortened their breeding season to 60 days, started pulling their bulls prior to pasturing and turned out only cows safe in calf.

In addition, after the Trichomoniasis crackdown, the Umbargers began using a more complete cow herd recordkeeping system, storing information on their computer and utilizing numeric calculations — such as Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs), pelvic scores and herd weight ratios — to select replacement females.

Using more advanced tools to predict performance, the last five years has shown an average increase in weaning weights of 138 pounds, a yearling weight increase of 192 pounds and a 24.2 percent higher calf crop. In addition, the Umbargers have been able to utilize this performance advantage in the feedlot through higher gains.

**Both Dave and son Steve concur,** changes this positive couldn't have been made without the use of artificial insemination (AI) and the access to the best

bulls. Their clean-up bull battery includes 18 to 24 performance-tested sires; at least 15 are registered Angus.

Yet Umbarger admits the family wasn't always sold on the breed. He thought his father was going to throw him off the ranch in 1966 when he came home from a sale with two Angus bulls. "They bred all our heifers and most of the cows, but the real proof was when Dad decided he liked the black-baldy calves." He adds, "The black ones are where it's at now."

Currently, the Umbarger breeding program is designed to produce cows which are about one-quarter Simmental and three-fourths Angus. Umbarger says he's found that the combination increases growth and milking ability while keeping mature cow size in check.

They are striving for a frame score five to seven cow, weighing around 1,100 pounds. In addition, the cross emphasizes maternal traits and improved carcass quality.

The Umbargers have a spring calving herd of 550 and 230 fall calvers. They heat synchronize with Synchronate-B in the spring and fall. In the spring, they divide the herd into three groups of around 175 and breed the first group of heifers to start calving around Christmas. They inseminate on a timed system and have had 65 to 75 percent AI calves. Although Umbarger is pleased with the results, he

plans to breed 12 hours after standing heat this year to raise conception rates. "It'll take some more manpower, but I think we can do it."

**In the beginning,** the switch to AI didn't come easily, although the circumstances were right and the numbers added up.

"We tried to use some half and even some three-fourths brothers, but figured we could spend up to \$15 per cow on a straw of semen and still make it work," Munson says, reminding Steve of the number of late nights trying to solve ranch problems using a pencil. "That's the thing about Dave. If you can prove on paper that it will work out, he's willing to try it.

"The three of us— John, Steve and I— were in our late teens or early 20s, so we were pretty radical," Munson adds. "The first morning we started breeding, Dave was so nervous he had to leave and walk around and go inside and get a cup of coffee. . . I think it paid off."

Today the breeding process begins not at the chute, but at the kitchen table. The Umbargers often discuss which bulls to use, taking recommendations from Munson and the oldest Umbarger son, Mike, who owns the Flying U Angus Ranch in central Oregon with his wife, Diane. Their simple equation mates the all-black cows to Simmental-Angus cross bulls. If a

## UMBARGER RANCH PERFORMANCE

	% Calf Crop	Weaning Weight	Home (Average)	Yearling Weight	Feedlot Gain
1986	72	497	68 days	690	2.83
1987	83	576	68 days	702	1.98
1988	87	606	68 days	748	2.09
<b>Double M</b>					
<b>Feedlot (Average)</b>					
1989	91	631	72 days	862	3.21
1990	96.2	635	72 days	882	3.43
Change	24.2%	138 lbs.		192 lbs.	

cow is less than half Angus she is bred to a registered Angus bull. All heifers are bred to registered Angus bulls with low birthweight EPDs, most likely a factor in their 96 percent calf crop in 1990.

The Umbargers are always on the lookout for a bull with better EPDs, yet they realize that not just one animal—or one breed—will meet their herd's needs. To find a good outcross and retain heterozygosity, Umbarger has bred some cows to Charolais and Limousin bulls, but still thinks the Angus-Simmental cross, lightly spiced with Hereford, works best for them.

Proof of the team's research resides in the oak hutch drawers beside the Umbarger's kitchen table — it is home to stacks of sire summaries.

"One drawer, that's all Sandy would allow us," Dave jokes. "Maybe since we won this award she'll give us more."

**Ideally, for a cow to stay** at Umbarger Ranches, she must wean a calf every year that weighs at 60 percent of her body weight. "We aren't striving for the biggest calves," Umbarger says. "We just want an efficient female who's doing the job. This weeds out inefficient big cows and maintains a standard."

Their current average is 55 percent of cow body weight. In addition, Umbargers focus on soundness of feet, legs, eyes and udders.

When selecting replacement heifers, the team assesses yearling weight, pelvic measurements — keeping the top of the herd on a ratio — and visual appraisal, including structural soundness, disposition and ability to conceive in a 45-day breeding season.

The Umbargers have made some simple but profitable improvements over the years. They attribute many of their gains to shortening the calving season to 60 days in the spring and 45 in the fall; balancing feed and mineral intake and using feed analyses to formulate least cost rations; and grouping cows by age for better management.

**Umatilla County is unique** in its self-sufficiency. As a top producer of wheat, barley, potatoes and hay, there is a ready supply of cattle feedstuffs.

The Umbargers have capitalized on this good fortune. They background their cattle at Double M Ranch in the northern part of the county, and usually sell to the C&B Livestock Inc. feedlot across the highway, eliminating stress and avoiding shrink costs. Interestingly, the owners of the two operations are former BIF commercial winners — Ron Baker and Mike and Diana Hopper.

Umbarger cattle typically perform well at the feedyard. Dave has traced carcasses through the IBP plant at Pasco, Wash., and has been pleased with the results. This year they had several steers place in the top 10 at the Umatilla County Steer and Carcass Futurity.

The Umbargers market their fall calf crop through local auctions. "So pounds are the top priority," Dave says. "We kept some bigger cows to calve in the fall, because we want terminal performance."

**Like most farmers and ranchers** in the '90s, the Umbargers have kept a close eye on newspaper headlines and agricultural policy. A big issue for them right now is the proposed grazing fee hike, which would raise rates from \$1.97 per grazing unit to \$8.70 by 1995.

"If they raise it, it will definitely change some things for us," Umbarger says, adding that the bill's passage would drive some producers out of the business.

To keep abreast of the issue, he's phoned the National Cattlemen's Association several times throughout the legislative life of the bill. "I'm not afraid to call anyone for information," he says.

Umbarger is an eager student, although as the BIF commercial winner he is often asked to assume a new role.

"Everytime you go to somebody's operation you can ask questions and pick out something that will work at home," he says. "It's interesting to me, though, that now they're asking us questions!"

