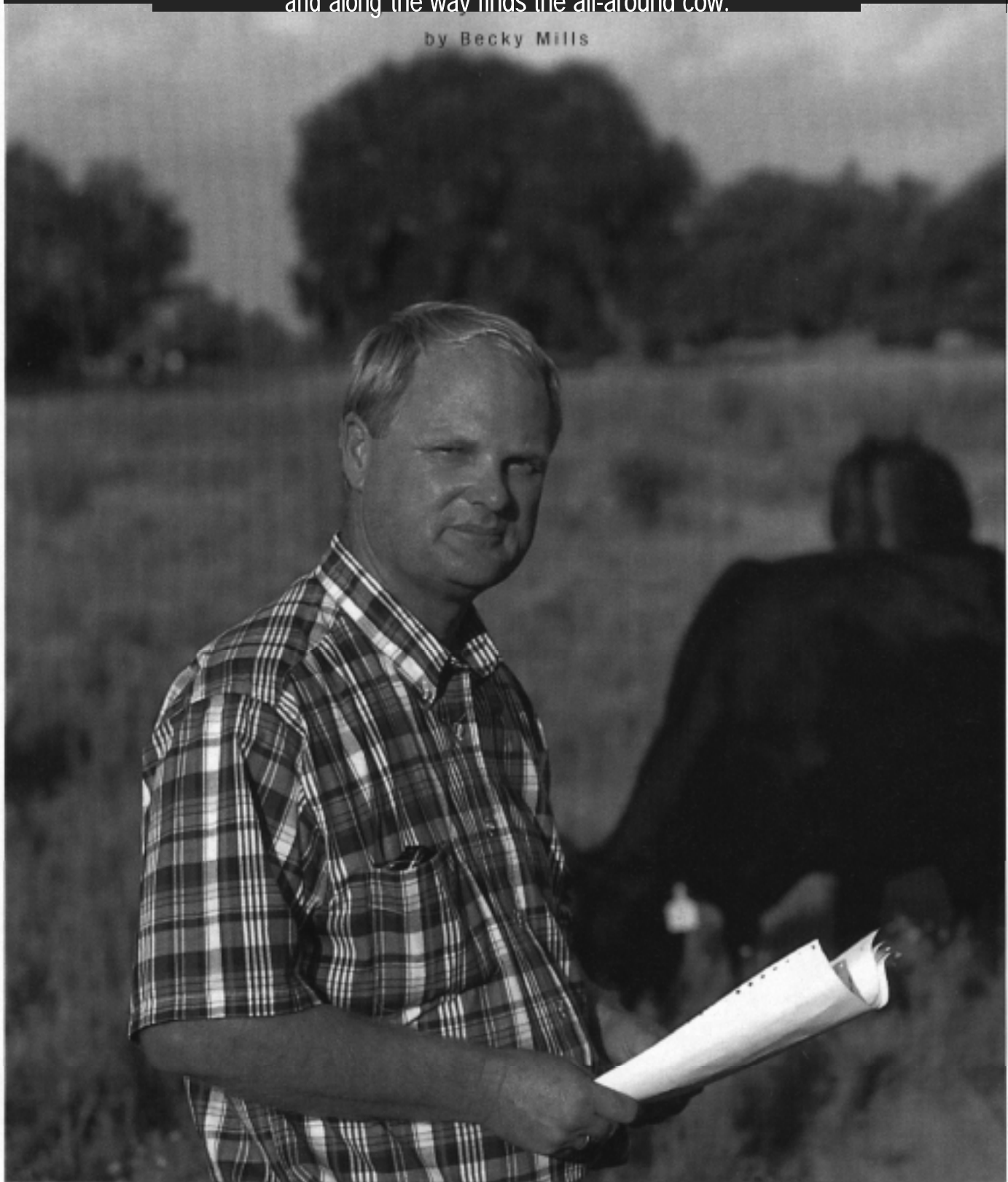


On the Trail

Georgia Angus producer James Fudge sets out to find the perfect steer and along the way finds the all-around cow.

by Becky Mills



Scrutinizing performance and carcass records James Fudge, Colquitt, Ga., found that cow families were affecting the numbers just as much or more than the sire

BECKY MILLS PHOTOS

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hen James Fudge first started sending his purebred Angus steers to his state's feedout trial, he had no idea their siblings would blow the competition away two years later. But that's not what this story is about. In his attempt to analyze the gain and carcass data from that first trial, he has ended up hot on the trail of producing the all-around cow.

"The first year, 1993, I got the most confusing amount of information when I looked at the expected progeny differences (EPDs) and tried to correlate gain. I couldn't relate it back to the EPDs of the bulls," Fudge recalls.

But, after hours and hours of pouring over the printouts from the 15 steers, he realized it was cow families, not the calves' sires, that seemed to be affecting performance and carcass characteristics.

"It was a research project with a small sample, but it intrigued me immensely," comments the Colquitt, Ga., seedstock producer. "From

Bermudagrass, notorious for its lack of quality, and bahiagrass, which is dependable, but not exactly the queen of forages, either.

"I'm a super-low cost producer," Fudge remarks.

Another qualifier for Fudge Angus is calving ease. "I've not pulled a calf in four years," he says. "I refuse to do it. If you don't pull calves, after a couple of years you don't have calving problems."

For those hardy souls that pass those criteria and get to stay in the 100 cow herd, the coast still isn't clear. Next comes the fine tuning — feedlot gain is a biggie.

"If it won't gain, it won't make money," he emphasizes. "I don't cull that much based on carcass quality, not yet, because gain is still the number one thing that affects the bottomline in the feedlot."

Gain aside, however, he does draw the line at carcasses that grade Standard. Replacement heifers from cows that produce a steer with a Standard carcass hit the road.

"If it won't gain, it won't make money."

that point on, every bull calf that was acceptable, I've steered and sent to a feedlot."

Now, with data from more than 300 steers in his computer, breeding super cows should be simple enough. Pick out the cow families that produce steers that gain like crazy and grade Choice, then cull the rest.

Wrong. The first order of business for a heifer or cow at Fudge Angus Farm is to be fertile. "Either she has a calf and is pregnant, or she's history," states Fudge.

Actually, that's only part of the requirement. Number one, she has to accomplish the feat in around 60 days. "A limited breeding season is the best thing you can do for your herd," Fudge says. "That is universally applicable. It weeds out your non-producers. And everything you do — castrating, weaning—you can do it easier."

OK, so maybe breeding in a short season isn't such a tall order for a decent Angus cow. After all, Fudge currently assigns all the breeding chores to bulls, which gives the cows a bit of a conception edge.

Fudge does not pamper his cows. During the winter breeding season, the cows typically go out on rye or ryegrass twice a week for about 16 hours of grazing. The rest of the week, they survive on gin trash, dead grass and hay. And it's not like they have it easy the rest of the year. Fudge's warm season pastures consist of Alicia

"There is some merit in that," comments Ron Bolze, Kansas State University animal scientist, "if it was a Select carcass, though, I'd think he was being a little ruthless."

Bolze adds, "I still have enough faith in marbling EPD numbers that I would keep daughters out of high marbling EPD bulls. I think they would produce an acceptable carcass even if they were out of cow lines that produced Standard carcasses before."

Not that the Fudge herd really has a problem with carcass quality. Generally, his steers hang 685 to 800 pound carcasses with .3 to .5 inches of fat and grade Choice minus or better. The five steers that won the 1995-96 Georgia Beef Challenge graded Choice with an average Yield Grade of 3.37, for a total carcass value profit of \$73.03 per head.

While Fudge puts the pressure on his cows, he also applies tough selection standards to his bulls. Since he started his purebred herd in 1988, he has mainly used home-bred bulls from his Graham and Darbyshire lines for sire duty, but now he is considering dusting off the artificial insemination (AI) tank he used with his commercial herd.

The EPD parameters he is placing on prospective sires include:

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Females that are fertile, easy calving and produce steer calves that will perform in the feedlot and on the rail call Fudge Angus Farm home.

birth weight +3 pounds (lb.) or less; weaning weight +25 lb. or more; milk +15 lb.; yearling weight +45 lb.; and positive EPDs for both marbling and ribeye. He has identified 34 sires from the Angus Sire Evaluation that meet the criteria, and is now examining the bloodlines.

And in the meantime, he'll keep culling, culling and culling on the female side.

"Determining what is good has changed for me," he remarks. "I had selected home grown bulls from what were good cows, but I just had the information through the stocker phase. Now that I've added feedlot and carcass information, it has changed the criteria of what is a good producer. My cow herd doesn't have the greatest carcass information, but I hope to breed one that does someday."

The southwest Georgia producer also says he has the selection advantage of being a low-cost producer. "I'm lucky, I don't have so much invested I can't send them to the stockyard. I still call my herd a commercial herd with papers. That's how I treat them," he adds.

One of his cows produced a steer with the unbelievable stats of a 17 inch ribeye on a 650-pound carcass. "I hope that was a typo," he winces. "I sent her to the stockyard because she didn't breed back."

He has also built a lucrative commercial market for his females, which helps ease the financial pain of separation from the heifers and cows that don't meet his standards. Of course, that has backfired a time or two when steer carcass information has shown him he was a bit too hasty in sending one down the commercial road. He's had to go beg and trade for a couple of them back, not that it has changed his hard-hearted ways. "Some people say I don't like my cows much," he jokes. "I can always find something to cull for. I've sold whole heifer calf crops because I wasn't satisfied. I've got 100 cows left in the herd and I had 160. I didn't cull to reduce numbers.

"I'm trying to produce something that is profitable in every production phase," he emphasizes. "That is rare."

And, although he refuses to become attached to his cows, he is fully aware of their importance, especially after discovering the influence of certain cow families.

Fudge says, "When you go to other producers' operations, they'll show you their herd sire. I'll show you my herd cows."

GEORGIA BEEF CHALLENGE
 Weaned steers are assembled at central points in the state and are weighed and graded. They are then shipped to Hitchell Feedlot in Garden City, Kan., to be fed. The finished steers are slaughtered in the Garden City area.
 The Georgia Beef Challenge is sponsored by the University of Georgia's Cooperative Extension Service and the Georgia Cattlemen's Association.

FUDGE ANGUS FARM RESULTS

YEAR	ADG*	% GRADING CHOICE
1993-94	2.77	67
1994-95	3.49	80
1995-96	3.45	100

*Average daily gain (pounds per day)