

Means Quality

From conception to consumption, Means cattle mean quality can thrive in a hostile environment.

by *Steve Suther and Rebecca Thomas*

After the great cattle drives of the 1880s, settled ranching came even to the harsh country of southwestern Texas. In 1884, Jon Means's great-grandfather moved his family down from the Davis Mountains to a broad valley near Valentine, about 150 miles southeast of El Paso.

The area soon turned to English Hereford cattle, and the Means Ranch was no different. But in the 1940s, a new generation broke with tradition and brought in Angus cattle, Jon says. "My family were seen as mavericks by most and pioneers by a few."

Indeed, his grandmother insisted on maintaining a Hereford herd while she had a say in the ranch. Nobody could have guessed that a ranch in these hot plains would produce cattle that achieved 50% acceptance as *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) product by century's end.

Jon's father, Coley Means, died just after his son's 23rd birthday, and Jon, having just graduated from college, returned to take over the Angus cow herd. Today, with wife Jackie and their three children, Jon operates Means Ranch Company Ltd., an 88,000-acre family spread.

By the time Jon took the reins of the ranch, the commercial Angus cows had been culled and adapted over the years to stand up to the local environment.

"It's not unusual to have 30-40 days over 100 degrees in the summer," he notes, "dropping to the low 80s at night." Winter can bring snowstorms, though daytime highs normally reach the 50s. Periodic droughts, such as those of the last two years, cut the average 12-inch annual rainfall in half,



► "We've been brutal in culling this year," says Texas cattleman Jon Means after facing the second consecutive year of drought-forced early weaning. "Besides the late-bred and unsound, any cow with significant wear on her teeth has been culled."

however, and predators, from mountain lions to coyotes, plague calving seasons.

In spite of these challenges, Jon works continually to improve his operation. "We're fortunate to have excellent water on the ranch, consisting of wells, windmills and miles and miles of pipeline," he says.

Genetics

Scouting around for a supplier of better Angus females, he found what he was looking for in Oklahoma at the Corbin

Ranch. "Carlton Corbin stayed focused on the moderate-framed Angus cattle," Jon says. "Never went to the short, dumpy kind; never went to the huge cattle, either." He built that base through the 1970s with bulls from another Oklahoma supplier, Spur Ranch.

For the last 15 years, Jon has purchased bulls exclusively from an Ashland, Kan., source. "Our relationship with Gardiner Angus is extremely valuable to this operation," Jon says. He buys bulls with the "big picture" in mind and uniformity an overriding goal, even to the point of using cloned bulls.

"Our philosophy matches so well with Gardiners, I know we're nearly always on the same page," Jon says.

"Their story is like ours," says Greg Gardiner. "They put diligent selection pressure on birth weight, not too much milk, moderate growth and now more carcass influence — and it's paying off."

"Not everyone realizes this, but after 10 or 15 years working on genetic goals, you're just getting in position to get the payoff," Gardiner adds. "It takes that long to get the genetic foundation set up, to get generations of cow families in place, and then you can start going somewhere. Jon's really stuck with it."

Earless in Texas

Because of those efforts to improve and adapt functional Angus cows to his environment, Jon sees no need today for Brahman crosses.

"I simply don't need to reintroduce them to my herd because the Angus are doing fine," he says. "I have not had the fertility problems sometimes associated with this climate; bulls go out to the cows in the spring when temperatures are not so much of an issue."

Jon has incorporated crossfencing that allows for rotation through many small pastures. That's great for resource conservation, but it plays a huge role in genetic improvement, too.

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The vast reaches make artificial insemination (AI) of cows impractical, but Jon keeps an elite corps of bulls for 30-day single-sire service in those pastures before turning in additional “cleanup” bulls. This is the first year he has used AI on heifers, synchronizing them in February for December calves. That will allow the first-calf heifers to calve a month ahead of the mature cows. Replacements are chosen from these early-born calves of known sires.

Progeny proof

For the past 10 years, Jon has fed steers at Triangle-H Grain and Cattle Co., Garden City, Kan., a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) licensed feedlot. Sam Hands, feedlot owner-manager, says the Means cattle grade 90-100% Choice.

“Gardiner’s customers in Texas who have divorced themselves from the belief that cattle have to have ‘ear’ (Brahman influence) now have cattle that are as good as the Kansas cattle,” Hands says. “Straightbred

Angus out of that environment will do anything the Northern cattle will do.”

Hands lets lighter groups of Means steers graze for 60 days before going on feed. The heavier steers get a 45-day grazing phase. “We get along better in the yard if we don’t push the British cattle too hard, too soon,” Hands says.

Despite near desert conditions in recent years, Gardiner says Jon weans a lot of “six-weight calves. For cattle with nothing to eat, that’s pretty good. If they had more rain, the sky would be the limit.” The past two years, Jon had to wean 30 days earlier than planned, and current stocking rates are no more than 40% of the target for non-drought years.

What kind of finished cattle come out of that environment? In 2000, a load of 57 of the culled 1999 heifers graded 68% CAB and Prime, 96.5% Choice or better, 54% Yield Grade (YG) 1 and 2, with no YG 4s. Even on a \$4 Choice/Select spread, they returned premiums of nearly \$65/head from U.S. Premium Beef (USPB). This year, on a friendlier Choice/Select spread, similar quality steers were returning \$100/head premiums.

Hands warns against chasing premiums without keeping everything else in balance as Jon does. “It’s the net overall profit that puts food on the table and keeps you in business another year,” he says.

Carcass traits have worked their way into the selection picture because the information is available, Gardiner says. “The ultrasound accuracy is pushing it to the forefront, and marketing through a value grid like U.S. Premium Beef, you’re getting paid for your end product. Certainly, with the success of CAB and the premium you get for those cattle, the push is on for quality.

“As we get more and more information, we’re able to put more selection on this as a breed,” he adds. “With the ultrasound tool, we can turn over more rapidly and really start making some changes.”

Jon Means believes in rapid turnover,

Gardiner notes. “He keeps heifers from heifers, as well as some young bulls. Ten years ago, you couldn’t have done that because we had strictly calving-ease sires. With the bulls we have today, you don’t have to give up anything.”

Indeed, Jon says his reasons for avoiding crossbreeding are all “financial — it allows us to sell bull calves and heifers easily.”

Breeding stock sales, primarily heifers, often make up more than half of annual cattle sales. That includes selling “used” Gardiner bulls that must move on because of generation turnover on the Means Ranch.

“All power to him,” Gardiner says. “He sells those bulls to another tier, so he can buy more up here. Some of his neighbors may like what they see and also come here to the source. Meanwhile, beef quality improves in more Southern herds.”

Hands returns feedlot and carcass data and consults with Jon on interpretation. “Despite the fact that he doesn’t have individual identification on his calves, Jon finds the individual data interesting, and it helps build his excellent overview of the big picture and how it all fits together. He knows the importance of keeping only productive cows, identifies the dinks and their dams, and gets them out of the herd,” Hands says.

This fall, as the second consecutive year of drought-forced early weaning was underway, Jon was mercilessly culling cows that might slip in production next year. “We’ve been brutal in culling this year,” he says. “Besides the late-bred and unsound, any cow with significant wear on her teeth has been culled.”

The early weaning allowed his fittest cows to regain condition before winter. Fall is the one time all Means cows see a chute for mousing, deworming, delousing, vibriolepto boosters and pregnancy checks. Even with the demands of strong teeth, some 10- and 11-year-old Means cows remain in the herd, which maintains an annual 95% pregnancy rate.

From conception to consumption, Jon Means has his herd tuned to a standard that competes favorably with cattle anywhere in the country.

“I just try to do a good job with what I have,” he says. Six years on the Texas Beef Council made him see the same potential success over adversity in the overall beef industry.

“We need to be concerned about food safety and the continuing false perception that beef is unhealthy,” Jon says. “But the industry is on the verge of some great things happening with value-added products, meal solutions and case-ready beef, and we’re proud of what *Certified Angus Beef* has done in those areas.”



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