



PINGREY and BLACK BULL

by Ann Gooding

On Nov. 17 Dave Pingrey completed his term as president of the American Angus Assn. He had served on the association's board for seven years and during that time exhibited a special talent for leadership, for speaking—for sizing up a situation, then summing it up simply.

Pingrey has a way of getting to the heart of a matter. Of getting down to fundamentals. And nowhere is that more apparent than at Black Bull Cattle Co., Benton, Miss.

The company, 10 years old this fall, is owned by Pingrey, a native Minnesotan, and H.S. Swayze, a native Mississippian. Pingrey arrived in the south some 30 years ago; Swayze's family was well entrenched there by the mid-1800s.

Pingrey's move from Minnesota began with four years at Iowa State University, where he was on the livestock judging team coached at that time by Vern Kerchberger, now an American Angus Assn. regional manager. During Pingrey's senior year the team did especially well, winning at both Kansas City and Chicago. And Pingrey did well, coming out high man at the latter. This led to an offer to coach the Mississippi State College (now Mississippi State University) livestock judging team, a position Pingrey accepted. He admits to some misgivings about his new home at first, but with exception of a 2-quarter stint coaching his alma mater's judging team, he's had a Mississippi address ever since.

Prairie Point Farm

It was in 1952 when Pingrey took over management of Gil Brown's Prairie Point Farm, Macon, that he first became involved with Angus cattle. Then in 1963, when Brown's death led to the herd's dispersal, Pingrey took a different tack, serving six years as executive secretary of the Mississippi Cattlemen's Assn. In 1969 he returned to black cattle, taking a position at Black Watch Farms, an investor company. This employment ended prematurely with the company's bankruptcy—but all was not lost. Black Bull Cattle Co. came into being when Pingrey and Swayze bought cattle from Black Watch receivers and moved them plus 22 investors' herds to Benton.

Land under Swayze's ownership there encompasses 4,800 acres. It includes not only Black Bull Cattle Co. (the only part in which Pingrey is involved) but also a commercial cow herd, 1,000 acres of cotton and a cotton gin, 700-800 acres in soybeans, 350 acres in corn, 125 in milo and 40 in catfish. (The catfish operation, which is rumored to be Swayze's favorite, is being increased to 140 acres.)

This land lies in one of the southeast's best cow-calf areas, in the heart of a strong commercial bull market. It is grass country. And although the grass is not the world's strongest, if rainfall cooperates, there's plenty of it—more than enough if a cow gets out and works for it.

No Pampering

Since that's exactly what cattle are expected to do throughout Black Bull's trade

"I've enjoyed it," Dave Pingrey, immediate past president of the American Angus Assn., says of his term and his seven years on the Board of Directors. "Wonderful people. That's the thing. It is pretty interesting—you go to different parts of the country and the management's different, sale programs are different, everything's different. But the people are the same. Their philosophy and what they expect out of life and what they put into life are pretty much the same although their cattle operations may be totally different.

"I think there have been several things," Pingrey replies when asked what he thinks is the most important thing the board has done in the last seven years. "I think the things the association has done in the time I've been on the board pretty well demonstrate that the board has realized how broad this breed is in the U.S. from the standpoint of uses, ownership, ownership objectives. And I think the activities indicate that we don't think all our efforts should be directed in just one spot or the other.

"I would have to say the National Sire Evaluation thing is super. And I think the Certified Angus Beef program has gone beyond what any of us had hoped for. I think it demonstrates a point that is important not only to Angus breeders but to any person who raises beef cattle. And that is the American public still wants quality in their beef and they are not listening to all this garbage—and it is garbage—about the unhealthiness of beef. I think that's important.

"Sure, the Angus people are the quality people, but everybody who is doing a little more than running cattle in the weeds had better be interested in keeping the quality image in American beef.

"I think the continued emphasis with refinements in various areas on our junior program has been important. The innovation of the Angus Bowl, of the National Junior Angus Assn., the concept of broadening junior heifer shows to encourage more participation—I think that's great.

"I think buying the ANGUS JOURNAL to improve communications between St. Joe and the membership was a positive step."

Pingrey sees the association's role in the future as "more of the same . . . continued constant examination of ways to improve and perfect what we are doing."

He continues, "The bylaws say the association must protect the integrity of the breed and I think that's important. I think our blood-typing program would have to be included as one of the really important steps we have taken. Certainly, I think everyone should realize that this doesn't represent a wide-spread problem. We are not composed of a million crooks. But life is life and there are some who can't stand ethical pressures. That's what you have rules for. That's one of our needs.

"And then we must continue to promote our breed. It doesn't do any good for six Angus people to sit in a room and say how great the breed is. We have to let these things be known. And we don't have to deviate one inch from the facts that have been proven at Clay Center or anywhere realistic information on breed differences has been gathered. We have a superior breed of cattle in lots of different areas.

"And I think our performance program to identify the superior cattle in these areas is another thing we have to continue.

"And we have to keep our junior program. Nobody's naive enough to think that every kid who picks up a lead-line on an Angus heifer is going to become an Angus breeder. But those kids are going to become citizens of this country, and what they learn is going to stand them in good stead. And some of them are going to become Angus breeders, and that's what we look to our future for."

And what of Black Bull Cattle Co.'s future? "Well, of course," Pingrey says, "our future has always been tied hand-in-glove with the beef cattle industry. These old commercial boys are what's kept us in business, and so long as they can get enough for their calves to keep running cow herds, we have a future. If something happens to the beef industry, if beef cattle production becomes unprofitable for any reason, then we have no future."

Looking to the immediate future, Pingrey has some plans for the time that will once again be his own. "I plan sure not to miss any more days of duck hunting. And I will tell you who is going to breathe a big sign of relief, and that's Mike Nelson (Black Bull's herdsman), because Mike Nelson has been doing two men's work while I've been gone and he hasn't complained. He's been great about it."

Looking back over his presidency, Pingrey concludes, "It's been tremendous. First of all, it's a tremendous honor—something you can't measure. And it's been a tremendous education. I'm the one who's gotten the most benefit out of it because I've had a chance first-hand to see all these differences and talk to all these people. It's been great.

area, that's exactly what Black Bull cattle are expected to do. There's no high-energy feed, no creep. The cattle are not pampered. Black Bull Cattle Co.'s only goal, solvency, couldn't be achieved if they were.

So from the beginning Black Bull has been an operation based on the fundamentals—the fundamentals of raising cattle that will sell well in the area. To do that it relies heavily on performance.

Pingrey had some exposure to performance at Prairie Point. And when the Black Bull herd was formed, it was enrolled in Mississippi's BCIA, then went on the Angus association's AHIR program. But Pingrey claims it was his experience on the board, his exposure there to people like Dr. Richard Willham, association performance programs advisor from Iowa State University, and Dale Davis, fellow board member from Belgrade, Mont., who gave him a better understanding of performance and its potential. In fact, his experience on the board probably has made Pingrey one of performance's most outspoken advocates.

And Pingrey's actions speak as loud as his words. All animals (608 Black Bull registered females aged 15 months or more plus about 40 head belonging to employees and family members) are enrolled on AHIR. And Black Bull not only had a bull enrolled in the association's first sire evaluation program, it since has been consistently involved in the program. In fact, in 1978 after completing this program with flying colors, Black Bull Matt Dillon (a home-grown bull by Briarhill Marshall 78 out of a Black Bull-bred cow) was selected an Angus Reference Sire. Since there are only four such sires used by the association at any one time, it's an achievement of which Pingrey is proud.

Ratios, Not Weights

Not surprisingly, Black Bull's performance program is tailored to Black Bull's needs. Ratios, not weights, are used. Pingrey explains, "What I am interested in is how much spread there is between the heaviest and the lightest and how the bulk of the calves distribute themselves and where our median point is. Here's the thing that convinced me that you can just confuse yourself on weights. For the first four or five years here, when we weaned calves, we weighed the cows also. I well recall one particular year. We had had an exceptionally good winter, with rye grass from Thanksgiving on into spring, and we moved bull calves up to 600 lb. And it just so happened that those were the first calves by the new bulls (Quantity and Quartermaster of Wye). We totally misread what happened and we said, 'Look what those new bulls have done for us! They have really upped our weaning weights.'

"Well, the next year we had a winter that was the exact opposite. And we don't subsidize our cows' feed much. Full brothers and full sisters weighed 50-75 lb. less at weaning. You could say, 'Well, they are full

brother and full sister but genetics are not the same so there could be some variation.' But the identical cows weighed within one week of the same point on the calendar as the year before weighed as much as 100-110 lb. less. That weight represented nothing but a difference in condition. And that will make you realize that when you say, 'I weaned a bull calf that weighed 550-650 lb.,' you really haven't said anything until you say, 'And he was so much ahead of his mates who had identical treatment.'"

No 140-Day Tests

So Pingrey believes using weights is impractical in his operation. And so, he says, are 140-day tests. He explains, "If we were to take some of our bulls somewhere and put them on 140-day test, we would obviously want to enter our best bulls. And that says a couple things that are contrary to our best interests. For one thing, our best bulls would not be here. They would not be here when we are ready to sell them. If we take them out, our water-mark bulls (or at least what we think are our water-mark bulls) are gone. So our comparative basis is completely without a rudder . . . Besides, we are not interested in getting just one or two bulls sold high. All our bulls that are useful as breeding bulls have to be sold."

So bulls do not go through a 140-day test. In fact, they are developed almost entirely without high-energy feed. When they are weaned, they go to pasture or silage and hay and, depending on the season and available feed, they may get some grain mixed with salt to limit intake. As might be expected under this sort of regime, the youngsters are not necessarily showy. As Pingrey puts it, "They're kind of like a butterfly. For a while they are quite a lot like a worm. They have to develop before you get to see any color. They won't impress many people. In the early stages, you couldn't get anyone to buy them unless you held a gun on them."

Bulls Need Age

But there is good reason for this system. And it all goes back to the fundamentals. "We can't sell yearling bulls," Pingrey points out. "Our cattle people are not going to take care of them. These bulls need to get some age on them for our buyers. And when these bulls leave us, they generally go to some rough treatment. If they are fat or have been confined, there is going to be a higher percentage of dissatisfied customers."

There's also economic consideration. "If we hold them until they are two and we keep them fat all their lives, then we aren't going to be in business very long . . . I honestly doubt I have any more money in my bulls when I sell them as twos than some have in yearlings." And he adds, "The old boys that buy these bulls like them. They breed their cows for them. And they don't come up crippled."

With this system, Pingrey cautions, deci-

sions can't be made quickly. "Some of the bulls get on the track quicker, and if you go to weighing them early, you are going to come up with some pretty confusing information. These bulls need to go on to 18 months before any choices are made."

Bulls grown out this way become the line-up for Bull Day, one of two Black Bull Cattle Co. annual sales. They are bulls that will work.

Ladies Day

And the cows in the Ladies Day Sale are no slouches either; in fact, each candidate has had to do her fair share just to make the sale order. She must be at least five and she must have left a daughter in the herd and she must have a heifer calf at side. Every cow meeting this criteria goes in the sale, by the way, and for good reason. The formula was devised to convince buyers that good females would be sold. Even so, Pingrey explains, the formula should not take the best from the herd. "Your young cattle are supposed to be your best. If our system is working, the daughters in the herd should out-produce their dams."

Pingrey, incidentally, doesn't cull heifers until they have had a chance to raise a calf. Then, he says, it doesn't take a genius to do the job. But he adds, Black Bull has no rules; it has general plans of action. So he is not that hard on first-calf heifers. Often, he claims, a heifer may have done her job, but if her nutrition is marginal, she may not get bred back because she cheated herself by raising a big calf. Or she may have an undesirable calf because she was bred to the wrong bull. "Shipping that heifer," he says, "is like cutting off your nose to spite your face."

The One Goal

He admits, however, to taking a tougher stance after that first calf—because there's that one goal at Black Bull Cattle Co. Solvency.

Is it being achieved? Well, this year's sale bulls looked good, maybe a little better than last year's, according to someone who saw both groups. "We've got another generation of our selection," Pingrey explains. "I don't think it is unreasonable to believe, as you continue to select bulls that are proving by their own performance that they are compatible with your type of management, that it will show in their offspring."

That alone could be testimony the system is working. As could the results of last November's Bull Day. An excellent crowd attended, but more important was the fact that better than three-fourths of those on hand were return buyers. The top bull brought \$4,700 from a commercial buyer who lives 12 miles down the road. The 69 bulls averaged \$1,118 and most, like the top bull, will see work in commercial herds. And if history does indeed repeat itself, those same buyers will be back in the future. The product Black Bull Cattle Co. sells suits them. 