

Mason and Jaci Wilkins have been in the Angus business a decade now. Transplants to the Northwest as well as the cattle business 10 years ago, the personable couple has since established a strong reputation through Tar Heel Angus. They firmly believe A.I. is a vital tool for small breeders and pedigrees in this herd include many of the breed's best known sires.



by Nancy Ann Sayre



TAR HEEL ANGUS

"We've done this all ourselves—together."
*To Mason and Jaci Wilkins,
that is the most important feature
of their Idaho operation.*

en years ago, Mason and Jaci Wilkins bought an Angus heifer, introducing themselves to the purebred business.

They ordered two ampules of semen, settled Tar Heel's one herd member on the first service, then welcomed a healthy bull calf. Eight months later, a neighbor traded two heifers for the bull . . . This is going to be easy, they thought.

With that, Tar Heel Angus was established in Nampa, Idaho. Then newcomers to the Northwest as well as the livestock world, the Wilkins are well respected in both realms a decade later. The path, however, did not prove to be as easy as their smooth start in the cattle business indicated.

"Since then, we've had about every problem and sickness a breeder our size could experience," says Mason. Frustrations with their growing herd have ranged from the expected nutrition and health problems, to breeding and calving "wrecks" (including caesareans on the garage floor before any shed was built), to the ever-present competition in marketing a product. The couple smiles, though, about the continual learning process. Tar Heel Angus has grown to include 35 mature cows, boasts of several show and sale champions, and has featured its first joint production sale. Most importantly, stress the Wilkins, it represents something they have developed themselves—together.

The personable couple has established a reputable herd, made a life of the Angus business and played an active role in the Northwest Angus industry. Their most important reward, however, has been in the people they have met and worked with.

Practicing Physician First

Mason is a gastroenterologist. In simpler terms, he specializes in diagnosis and medical management of digestive disorders. Although modest about his success in the medical field, he is highly respected by his colleagues and currently represents Idaho on the governing board of the American College of Physicians, an elitist organization of physicians.

It was Mason's medical practice that landed his family in Nampa. His home and initial practice were in Durham, N.C. (a fact quickly revealed by his accent if not the farm name), but an interest in hunting and subsequent search for open, unspoiled area prompted the move west. A group of doctors in Nampa needed someone with Mason's expertise and by accepting their offer, he became the state's first gastroenterologist. He remarks, though, that his family's involvement in the cattle business has been vital in making them feel a part of the Northwest.

Typical Evolution

Tar Heel's start was typical in many ways: Wilkins bought the house in the country and rented out the land, then decided to raise a steer for freezer beef and eventually wet their feet in the purebred world.

Setting Tar Heel apart from many small, part-time operations is this family's energy—their willingness to learn and enthusiasm to do things themselves.

They started from point zero, but they see that clean slate and lack of prejudice as an advantage in their approach. Coupled with an open-minded attitude was a real thirst for learning and a doctor's tendency to research each angle.

From the start, Mason and Jaci looked to many sources for information. They read as much as possible before ever deciding on their first purchase, settling on the problem-free nature of Angus and then studying various sales and reports to get a feel for the market.

They traveled to Reno to make their first purchase, selecting a Mon Repos-a-bred heifer shown by Chet Moon, Connell, Wash. The late Dale Thompson agreed to deliver her to Nampa since he and his wife Carol were headed to nearby Potlatch, Idaho. Thompsons were traveling with Bob and Gloria Thomas, and strong friendships which grew from Wilkins' first introduction to those folks have had a lasting influence at Tar Heel.

A.I. From the Start

The novice couple spent hours at Thomas Angus Ranch in Baker, Ore., absorbing a great deal about the business of raising Angus cattle. (As Mason describes their lessons, the Thomas family "took us by the seat of our pants . . . they really work hard and manage what they have to the maximum advantage.") One decision made by Wilkins after studying Thomas's progressive family operation concerned A.I. use.

Mason and Jaci recognized the access to nationally acclaimed sires as a small breeder's most important tool. They bred Tar Heel's first lady to the popular Camilla Chance 37T ("Colossal") and have since built a herd on top genetics. In fact, Wilkins never used a clean up bull until three years ago; at that point they wanted to close up the Tar Heel breeding season, but continued to utilize A.I. as much as possible.

Jaci, an Iowa native, took an aggressive interest in the program and went to A.I. school. For two years she bred the cows, but less than 10 head made it hard to stay in practice. The learning experience however has helped in heat detecting, nutrition and general management.

Currently, two or three of the breed's top sires are put to work in this small herd each



Davis Wilkins plays an active role in this family operation. She and her brother have been successful with several home-bred females at junior events. The Tar Heel name has appeared on pedigrees of area show and sale toppers as well.

year. Mason and Jaci try to analyze weaknesses in their herd and breed accordingly.

"Using the very top sires is our only edge," comments Mason. "It's the fire behind our breeding decisions each year and the only way we can compete."

Consignment Sales Initial Step

And a small breeder must compete to sell a product. Merchandising may be a basic ingredient of a business's success, but it often represents the most difficult problem confronted by purebred breeders.

"Sooner or later, everyone in the business has cattle to sell," says Mason, "but not everyone can have a sale. A small breeder has to have a place to market a few head. Consignment sales are a good place to start."

Wilkins entered the Angus business through that very channel. They now continue to support association-sponsored events as both a buyer and seller although they have built a private treaty market and co-hosted a production sale. "We need to keep the sales alive for small breeders to sell their good cattle," says Mason with a voice of experience.

"I've been through that painful process of first wanting to have cattle, wanting to have good ones and build a herd, then facing the sometimes frightening reality of the question: How am I going to market them?"

He and Jaci started on the local level, consigning a few bull calves and learning to fit cattle in the process since sale order was based on show results.



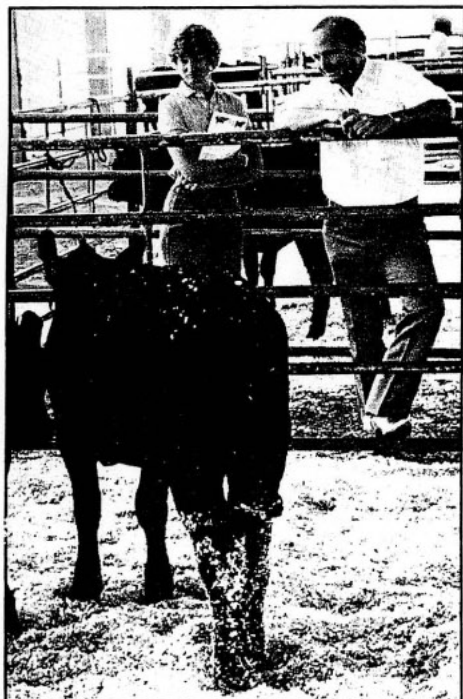
TAR HEEL ANGUS

Wilkins have done well and expanded their horizons. A tally of successes include champions or top-sellers of leading area events such as the Gem State Classic, the Evergreen Supreme Sale and both the Inland Empire Angus Assn. bull sale in Hermiton and state association bull sale in Twin Falls.

Both children, Davis, 13, and Bruce, 11, have shown heifers carrying the Tar Heel name in junior shows and a Tar Heel entry took reserve grand champion bull honors the first year Wilkins entered the state Angus show in Boise. They started showing only because show placings determined sale order, but such exposure has further enhanced the farm's reputation and helped lead to private treaty sales.

Again, Mason stresses the value of interaction between small breeders through area sales and shows. "We need to know the people and be involved in the things that are going on," he says.

He has held several offices in the Boise Valley and state associations, placing special emphasis on sale promotion. He is also the immediate past president of the Western States Angus Assn., a position which put



Mason and Jaci started in the Angus business with a few consignment sale selections. Although they have established the herd and reputation necessary for private treaty and production sales, they continue to buy and sell in area consignment sales. Such support and interaction, Mason feels, is important to every small breeder.

During the Civil War, Confederate soldiers from North Carolina found their feet black after fording a river into which tar had been dumped. In an ensuing battle shortly thereafter, these soldiers were particularly tenacious and won the battle after which General Robert E. Lee remarked, "God bless those tar heeled boys." Since then North Carolina has been known as the "Tar Heel" state.

him in contact with a broader range of Angus breeders.

Consignment sales and shows encouraged involvement with breeders and provided many contacts, but Wilkins have not geared their breeding program just for show ring results. Buyers in the area insist on cattle with plenty of volume, capacity and muscling. Tar Heel's Mon Reposa base has worked well in meeting those demands. Performance at weaning has been an important selection criteria in replacement heifers and bull sale prospects as well as A.I. herd sires.

Jaci feels strongly that calves produced for their commercial customers or purebred sales and shows should be results of the same breeding program. Such a philosophy has helped sculpture a uniform herd and create a solid demand for Tar Heel calves.

Building on Experience

The Wilkins will be the first to admit they have made many mistakes along the way, though.

"For instance," elaborates Jaci, "we went through the stage of thinking you can buy an average cow bred to a good bull and get this fantastic calf . . . it doesn't happen."

"But we've tried to build on the wealth of information learned by things done wrong—errors in our thinking about what is good or what should be done," adds Mason. "That's been the challenge and remains the challenge . . . to get better."

The challenge has been accepted well and experience has been a good teacher at Tar Heel.

This past spring Wilkins hosted their first joint production sale, a big step for breeders of just 35 cows. They combined forces with the Tom Farner family, neighbors and co-owners of the only three herd sires Wilkins have ever purchased.

Firm believers in the theory that a breeder must offer a few of their best to attract buyers and command their confidence, Wilkins offered their entire 1982 heifer-calf



Mason Wilkins is a practicing physician and well-respected in medical circles. He hails from North Carolina originally, thus the farm name.

crop, all of their 1981 replacement females and a few select bulls.

Representing progress made in a brief 10 years, the young cattle spoke well for Tar Heel. Sires such as Thomas Elevation, Thomas Big Shot, Cracker Jack Baros SA 860, Thomas Chaps and several others drew the attention of breeders from across the Northwest. Pedigrees carried Tar Heel breeding on the bottom side, yet illustrated the concentrated use of popular A.I. sires.

The efforts earned a \$1,550 average on 45 lots as an impressive debut. Wilkins, of course, cannot afford to sell an entire heifer calf crop annually. They do not plan to host a sale every year, but hope to continue the event and perhaps involve a few other breeders.

People are Greatest Reward

There are those who still fail to believe Wilkins are serious breeders, simply because Mason is a doctor as well. A taste of the couple's enthusiasm and intensity easily denies such doubts. Jaci is chairman of Nampa's school board and involved in continuing her own education, but Angus cattle and joint management of the herd has become the center of their lives.

Together they have built a small but successful herd and done it all themselves. (The only help was hired to clip cattle for the recent production sale.) They have not hesitated to call on the advice of many breeders, though, and resulting friendships represent the most valuable reward.

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