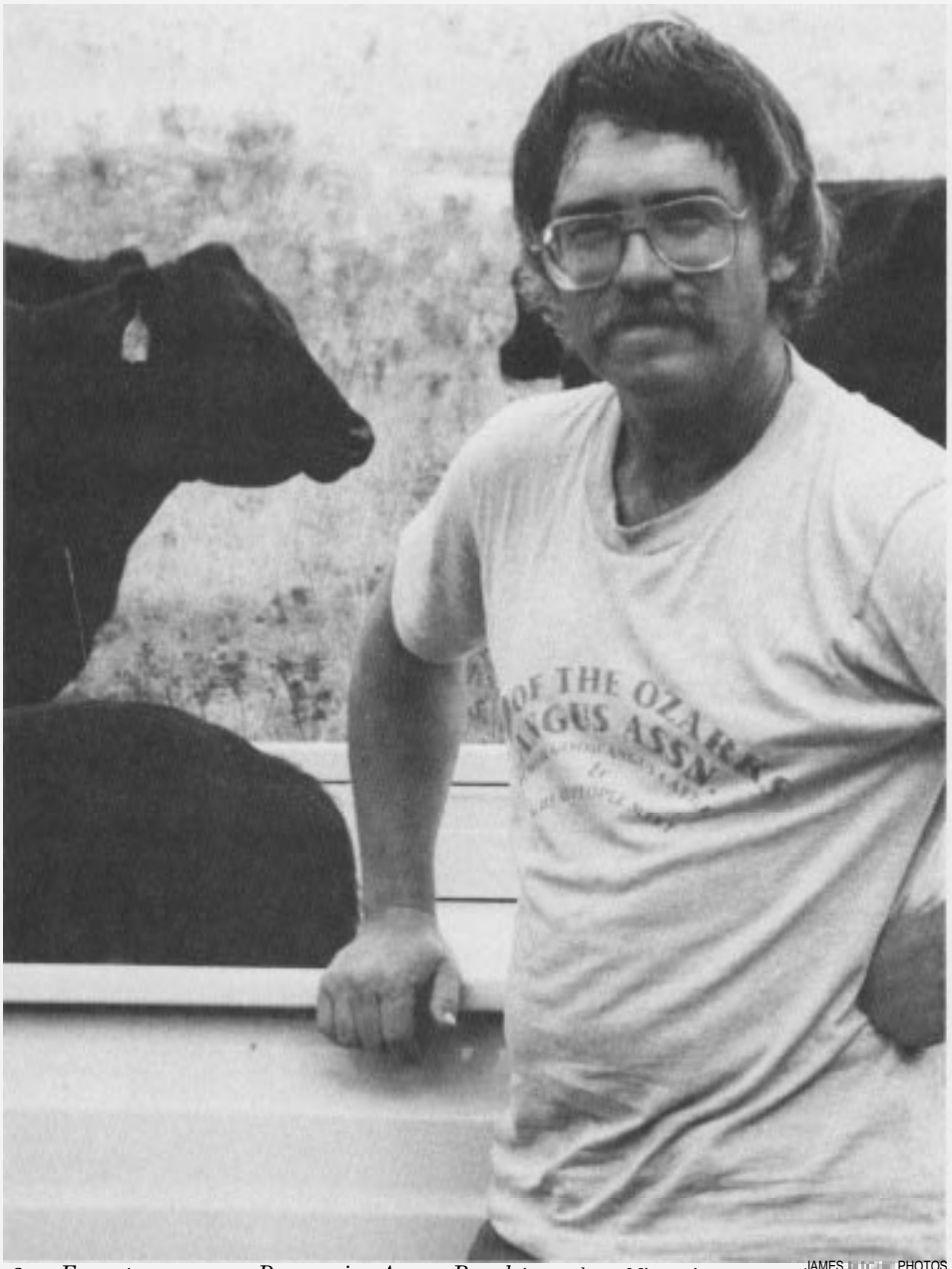
Keep Heifers from Heifers

by James D. Ritchie



JAMES RITCHIE PHOTOS

Steve Forrester manages Progressive Angus Ranch in southern Missouri. The female side of the breeding equation gets top priority.

The best way to add to a herds genetics is by subtraction. This is the breeding philosophy of Steve Forrester, of Progressive Angus Ranch, Howell County, Mo.

"You can make a lot of genetic progress by shipping cows and keeping heifers, if they are the right kind of heifers," he says.

Forrester has bred Angus cattle since he was 10 years old, when he bought his first heifer. In the years since, he has put a lot of emphasis on the female side of the equation, and still does. Within the past year he has culled the mature cow herd by more than 25 percent, replacing them with heifers.

"A heifer gives me one more generation toward my genetic goal," he says.

Many commercial cattlemen and some registered breeders might question Forrester's philosophy. Mature cows milk heavier than first-calf heifers and usually raise bigger calves. That's why performance-tested calves out of heifers get a 60-pound fudge factor on weaning weights, and it's why some producers tend to keep heifers from mature cows.

A long-term North Carolina study, however, reinforces Forrester's notion. Data was collected on a Polled Hereford herd for more than 17 years to compare how heifers out of different-aged cows performed when those heifers became cows. The researchers found that the best milking cows in the herd were raised by two-year-old dams, with heifers from three to four year olds average for milk flow.

It probably wouldn't come as any surprise to Forrester that heifers raised by mature cows made the poorest mamas of the bunch.

This is especially important for a seedstock producer.

If we're making genetic progress, the first-calf heifer should have the best genes. Your cattle aren't very predictable until you get three or four generations stacked together."

If your breeding blueprint is correct, the latest animal born should have the largest stockpile of desirable genes. Forrester points to his 945 cow as a good example.

"She is a first-calf heifer out of a first-calf heifer out of a first-calf heifer," he says. "Brost Power Drive was her sire, Premier Independence is her grandsire and Emulous 60E is her maternal grandsire."

Forrester had a model cow in mind when he bred the heifer that was to become 945's grandmother. Each bull in the pedigree is at least 60 inches tall; each is a calving-ease sire; and all have double figures on milking EPDs and plus-40 on growth.

"She now is bred to a Shamrock bull that is 61 inches tall, has a +54 EPD for yearling weight and +28.7 on milk, but only +2.2 on birthweight," says Forrester. "I just hope her first calf is a heifer."

That would give Forrester four generations of first-calf heifers, and a concentration of 90 percent of the genes controlled through sire selection.

Back in 1970, Forrester bought females from Sun-Up Angus and Flint herds -both performance-test breeders – and began putting his breeding philosophy into practice.

Twenty years later, he had increased weaning weights and yearling weights of his calves by an average of 300 pounds; an accomplishment that earned Forrester Seedstock Producer of the Year honors from the Missouri Beef Cattle Improvement Association.

"Most of the females in my herd go back to a Flint cow, 2361 Gaines Lady," he says. "That cow line has produced nine top-indexing bulls at the University of Missouri performance test station."

Most Progressive Angus Ranch females are bred by artificial insemination (AI) to top sires in the country. Here, too, heifers win praise from Forrester.

"Heifers are easier to synchronize than are mature cows," he says. "I breed heifers to calve one heat cycle before the main cow herd and use Lutalyse to group heifers for breeding."

Here's how he manages:

For-rester likes to get all heifers bred to calve during the first week of September. Suppose he notices a heifer in heat during fall that would put her dropping a calf on August 25. Forrester injects the heifer with Lutalyse to interrupt the natural heat cycle and get her estrus more in synch with other heifers.

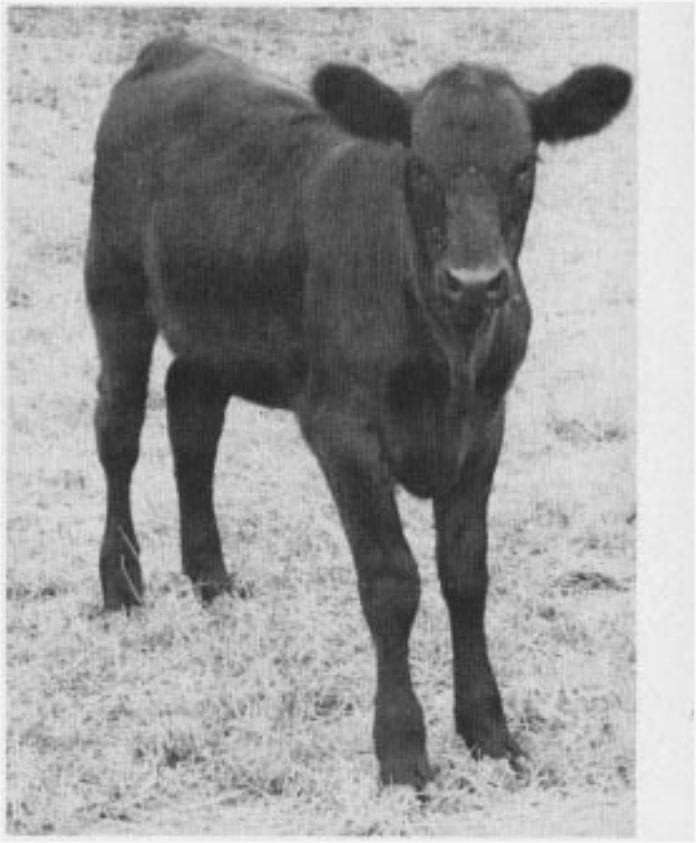
"Once the heifer's estrus cycle is better-aligned with when I want her to calve, I breed her on a natural heat after the synchronized estrus," he says. "This works very well when you're breeding AI. I think cow-calf operators could use the same technique to group heifers for breeding by natural service. You'd need plenty of bull power, of course."

Forrester performance tests all bull calves; most sell to commercial cow-calf producers. He has sold bulls at the Missouri performance test sales for more than 20 years.

"I'm trying to stay balanced in economic traits, but I want to keep more size in my cattle than some breeders now want," he says. "My bulls are herd changers and I like a strong 7-frame sire. We still need cattle that will grow quickly and efficiently. We have enough variety in germ plasm now to just about tailor-make whatever we want. You don't have to sacrifice frame and growth to get low birthweight and calving ease."

Serving as a good breeding road map, is the Angus Herd Improvement Records program. Forrester uses AHIR updates to make most decisions on culling and selection. And when it comes to culling, the Missourian can be ruthless.

"If I'm on target with my selections and matings, the youngest animals in my herd should be the nearest to my genetic ideal," he says. 'When one of my top first-calf heifers is ready to drop a calf, I always wish for another heifer." AJ



If your breeding program is on track, the youngest heifers are the biggest "stockpile" of desirable genes, says Steve Forrester.

"If we're making genetic progress, the first calf heifer should have the best genes."