



Leo McDonnell Jr. may be running a program that's known to cattlemen as the "granddaddy of performance," but you won't find an old man sitting in a rocking chair on his front porch near Columbus, Mont. To be honest, it might be difficult to find Leo if you stop by Midland Bull Test just to chat — there's always work to be done.

If you do plan to come a callin' to find Leo, watch your step as you walk into the office building. There's nothing but the winter elements to accompany you onto the ice-covered, pinewood porch. As you open the door to the office, an empty coat rack informs you that no one is in at the time.

It's not that the office has been left to run itself, nor does it mean no one wants to chat with you. You might just have to look down at the veterinary barn, over at the loading chute or in the pens to find Leo and the rest of the family. They're usually out taking care of some of the best genetics the cattle industry has to offer.

While Leo took the time to sit down to talk to the *Angus Journal* about the foundation program his father started many years ago, the phone kept ringing, visitors came and left, and deliveries were made. It was just another day at Midland.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 94

An Eye for

Bull Performance

The McDonnell family has owned and operated the "granddaddy of performance," the Midland Bull Test, for more than 40 years.

Story & photos by Corinne Blender

A family business

Midland Bull Test is a family-owned bull-testing station located along the river bottom of the Yellowstone River. Leo; his wife, Sam; and their children look after the business. A limited amount of outside help is used. The elements can be less than forgiving in the cold winter months when as many as 1,800 head can be on test. It can be a true test of the genetics that breeders from across the nation bring to winter with the McDonnells at Midland.

Performance testing isn't an age-old practice. But it's not in its infancy either. It was developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Leo McDonnell Sr. began Midland Bull

Test in 1962. McDonnell said his father's college experiences led him to begin the test, but his father's dream wasn't always a popular one.

"There had been some talk among a handful of breeders within the industry that we needed to start measuring traits that were economically important to ranchers, and that is really the foundation of the performance concept," McDonnell says.

Prior to that time, breeders had evaluated animals on their phenotypes, and prized animals were progeny that came from champions at shows such as the International in Chicago and the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver.

"When they started the concept it was a pretty bold step," McDonnell says of his father's chosen path. "People had always judged cattle based on visual appraisal, and we were talking about increasing discipline and documenting genetic differences at that time."

The performance-testing concept is no different today than at the time of its inception, McDonnell says. "The central test is a measuring stick for genetic differences in the breed within a real-world environment where you can make those comparisons without the biases that we might find within individual programs or short-term consignment events like a show or sale," McDonnell says.

While McDonnell acknowledges the differences between visual and performance information, he doesn't want to downplay the role of phenotype in cattle selection. The showing and the bull test stations are both great ways to promote a breed, he adds.

"Anything that you can do within a breed to bring people together and promote your breed is a success story. Performance testing is just one part of that, but that happens to be where our passions are," he says.

► McDonnell says there are no politics at the feedbunk. The bulls fend for themselves in the sometimes harsh winter environment of south-central Montana.



► A limited number of outside employees help the McDonnell family run Midland. McDonnell's son, Steve, is in charge of the veterinary program. Outside help will help check pens for any sickness or injury while the bulls are on feed during the 130-day test and help put on the three-day sale after the test is complete.



► Lot after lot of Angus bulls line the north end of the Midland feedyard. McDonnell says Angus breeders are leaders in performance testing.



Test in action

"It has gone from a handful of people who believed very passionately in moving the cattle industry forward with these kinds of measurements, to where it is now a common concept within the industry," McDonnell says of performance testing. When Leo and Sam took over Midland in the mid-1970s, they wanted to promote the performance concept more. "We've tried to give it more national and international recognition."

Pen after pen of Angus cattle are proof that Angus breeders want to know more about their genetics. Midland attracts breeders from Connecticut to Texas and on through the Central Plains to its home state of Montana. It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from, McDonnell says there are no favorites to be played. Midland can work for anyone's program when good genetics are involved.

"You can take a look at a relatively small breeder out of Indiana who sells a bull for \$202,000, and it is all real money," he points out of the 2002 Midland sale. "Then your second high-selling bull comes from another not-so-high-profile breeder. That is when Midland is working."

"People are coming here looking for the best genetics they can get, regardless of whose name is associated with them. They are buying these genetics instead of promotion."

Today, Midland is the largest bull test

station in the country and is privately owned and family-operated. McDonnell says that many bull tests have gotten started across the United States, which continues to spread performance testing's popularity.

"The more performance tests around, the better it is for the performance world," he says.

"One way we differentiate ourselves is in our ration. I don't believe you have to feed bulls to gain 4 or 5 pounds a day to measure their genetic differences," he says. "Even more important, whether people like to admit it or not, is that we are just as much marketers of grass as we are marketers of beef."

McDonnell says the money to be made in the beef industry is in the performance — how the natural resources can be transformed into a marketable product.

"That is why we feed a high-roughage ration," McDonnell says. "The importance of having a marketable product is why the Midland Bull Test was one of the very first seedstock programs to start ultrasounding bulls, as early as 1970."

Collecting data

Producers now are better able to interpret ultrasound information, McDonnell says. "In the 1970s, people weren't interested in the end product," he adds. Now, marbling, ribeye area and fat thickness are all measured for their importance to the end product, as the industry has shifted to a consumer-oriented business.

"There is no way you can compare ultrasound data between bulls that are fed in different environments. You can't compare from one herd to the next," McDonnell says. "But you can come in here and look at a set of bulls that have all been grown out the same, fed the same, and you can get the ultrasound data and pick up some trends in different lines."

McDonnell says he has seen genetic lines of cattle that tend to sort out to the top at Midland. He points out that is proof the test works by consistently identifying top performers.

When data is collected on bulls, the information doesn't just stand alone. The information is collected and is entered into the largest database in the beef industry.

"It's definitely a credit to the leadership and the staff that this breed (Angus) has been at the forefront of making decisions and offering tools that propel this breed past other breeds. An example would be AHIR (Angus Herd Improvement Records) and CAB (Certified Angus Beef LLC). This is an aggressive breed association.

"They have such a tremendous genetic base. If you are looking for calving ease, for maternal traits, for carcass, for fertility, for maturity at different frame sizes — no

► Memorabilia from the 1960s line the office counter in the Midland office. The station has been family-owned and -operated since Day 1.

matter what you are looking for, this breed has it," McDonnell continues. "They have enough genetic information behind them to make the cattle very predictable, which is important to bull buyers."

Midland offers a similar security for bull buyers that the database of the American Angus Association offers. The bulls are tested in an unbiased arena where the data can speak for itself. "When customers buy a bull and they buy the genetics, they expect a certain performance out of those genetics. We are able to do that because of the strength in the Angus database," he says.

McDonnell's philosophy is to recognize breeders for their top performers at Midland. He encourages breeders to visit the test station to view the animals and to identify bulls that may work best in their ranching environments.

"A good performance bull should show signs of early maturity. He ought to look like a bull. He ought to have some scrotal size," he says. "He should have a good cow behind him. You should have a phenotype that enhances that rancher's program."

But McDonnell cautions that performance can be a misused word. "A good performance program or a performance bull is a multi-trait animal." But performance can be different depending on what animals you are talking about. "When you talk about the performance of a cow herd you are not talking growth. You are talking about fertility, percent calf crop weaned, udder quality and the cow's ability to grow the biggest calf she can on the least amount of input," he says of female performance.

The more difficult it is to get a fair value in this industry the more important performance testing will be, McDonnell points out. When markets are good for a

sustained period of time, breeders will become more relaxed about testing. "Then all things have to do is get a little tough and people are starting to look for a way to get a better return on their resources. There is only one place you can turn," he says. "EPDs (expected progeny differences) don't measure efficiency. EPDs are an excellent tool, and we have enhanced our ability to manage genetics with these, but they still don't compare cattle in real-world environments like we do at a place like Midland or maybe by carcass testing a bull.

"Somewhere along the line somebody has to put the product into a real environment and do a comparison," McDonnell points out. "It takes the brag out of it and replaces it with reality."

As it continues to get tougher and tougher for cattlemen to make a dollar, McDonnell says performance testing will continue to be more and more important. He says Midland will continue to offer breeders information on their cattle and to promote it on a national and international level.

"We have three different reports that are mailed out to nearly 6,000 active ranchers. If your cattle do well you will definitely be recognized. That is one of the nicest compliments that we get from the consigners — the contacts that they have made, potential contacts and the recognition they have received when they test here."

Midland attracts nearly 1,200 visitors on Angus sale day. There is nowhere in America you can find this many top bulls from as many top performance programs, McDonnell says. "It doesn't matter if you are a big breeder by name, or a small breeder by name, or an unknown. You have the same shot at winning because there are no politics at the feedbunk."



► The feed ration at Midland Bull Test is a high-roughage diet designed to take advantage of a real-world environment with real-world feed-stuffs.



Editor's Note: Midland Bull Test is one of many central bull tests conducted in the United States. These tests, along with contact information, are listed in the "Resource Edition," which is published as an insert each year in the August issue of the Angus Journal. The "Performance Report" column published each month provides notices, updates and summaries for current tests.