

BIF President Richard McClung approaches the cattle business with vision, dedication and drive.

Story & photos by *Becky Mills*

For those who know Richard McClung, it is no surprise that Border collies are his canine breed of choice. The same drive, laser-like focus, work ethic, intelligence and loyalty that characterize the breed describe the man.

“I’ve had Border collies for 20 years plus,” says the New Market, Va., Angus breeder. “I grew up on a horse. I didn’t know you could do cattle work without a horse. But time is always of the essence. I can take a couple of dogs and have a set of cattle in the pen before I can get a saddle on a horse and get out there to them.”

“Richard is a type-A personality — he is anything but a laid-back person,” says retired Virginia Tech animal scientist Ike Eller. “He is a doer, a worker. He likes to see things moving.”

“Richard is very driven, very direct,” says Bill Bowman, director of performance programs for the American Angus Association. “He is about as no-nonsense a person as you’ll run across.”

That drive and focus helped him make a life-altering decision while he was majoring in animal science and playing baseball at West Virginia University. With a major-league career dangling in front of him, he gave up baseball to focus on animal science.

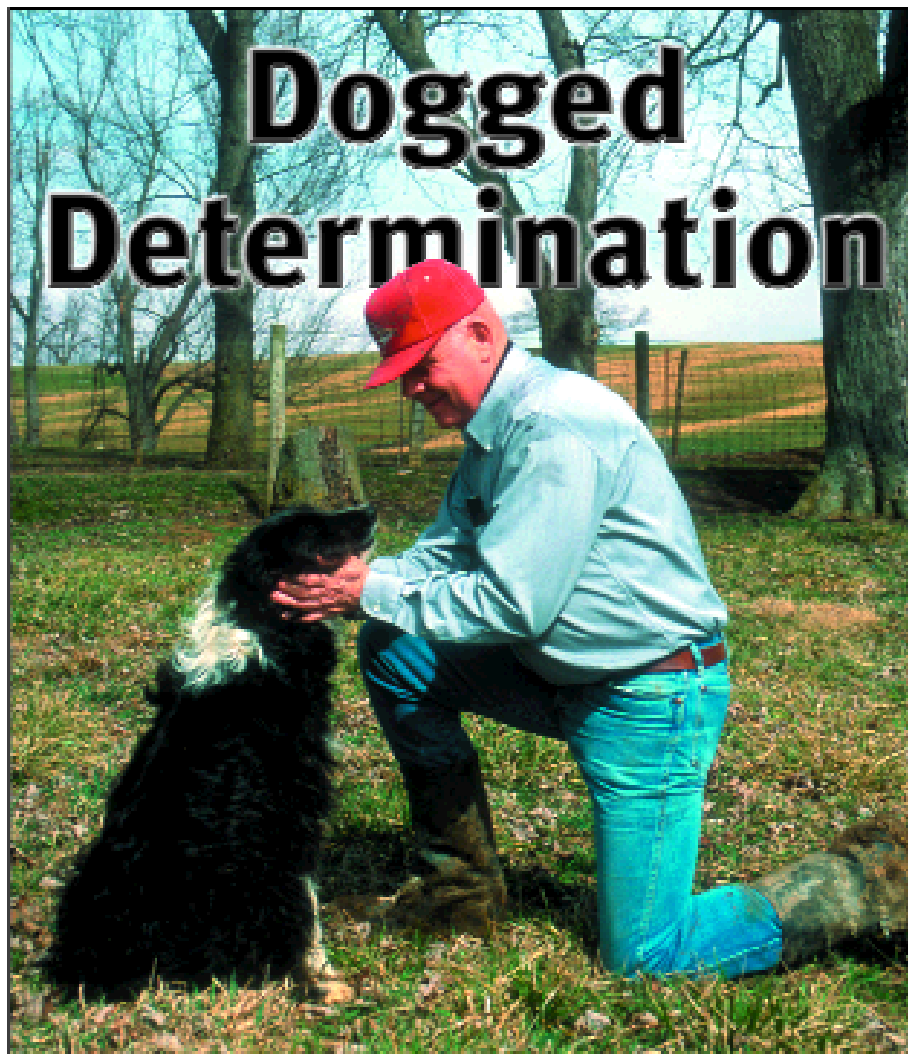
“I couldn’t do the baseball thing and do physics and chemistry and the labs,” he explains. “My baseball coach, who was a scout, told me I had a million-dollar arm and a 10¢ brain.”

“He may not have been the smartest man I ever knew, but he was probably the smartest man who knew me,” McClung jokes.

There are those who would argue the point, although not the part about the million-dollar arm. In his 25-year career as manager at Wehrmann Angus, McClung has undoubtedly developed more than a million dollars worth of cattle with his artificial insemination (AI) skills. But as for the 10¢ brain, hardly.

A top manager

At Wehrmann, McClung manages 590 breeding-age females and puts another 350 embryos in Virginia, Nebraska and Colorado cooperator herds.



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Besides the breeding decisions, there is the merchandising. In March, 100 bulls sell through the annual Wehrmann bull sale, and in October, another 100 sell in a joint sale with Donnell Cattle Co., Graham, Texas. Fifty bulls are also sold private treaty.

Don’t forget the females. The second Saturday in October, 120 head sell at the farm while another 80 head sell private treaty.

Yes, the cattle represent a lot of dollars. But that’s obviously not what drove the baseball vs. cattle decision. “Cattle are a part of me,” says the 62-year-old McClung. “It’s what I do. It’s what my ancestors did.”

“I even like the hard times,” he adds. “You can find out what you can do during the hard times.”

The breeder’s exposure to the cattle industry started with his family’s commercial cow-calf and sheep operation in Lewisburg, W.Va. Even though his involvement with purebred Angus cattle began when he was 14 years old, the commercial mind-set stuck with him.

“We try to breed cattle that will benefit the commercial business,” he comments. “We try to raise cattle like our customers raise cattle.”

“We run cattle on pure fescue,” he continues. “I don’t like fescue, but it is a good culling tool. If they will work on fescue, they will work anywhere in the country.”

Or out of it. Wehrmann cattle also go to Australia, Argentina and New Zealand.

The ability to work anywhere is just part of the job description for cattle that wear the Wehrmann W freeze brand. In a 1991 *Angus Journal* article, McClung said he wanted to breed the complete cow. “We’re still trying to breed that complete animal,” he emphasizes.

“We want a low-birth-weight EPD (expected progeny difference); enough milk, 20 to 25 pounds; 80 pounds of growth; a moderate frame; a plus in IMF (intramuscular fat), ribeye and percent retail product; plus fleshing ability and slick-haired cattle.”

He adds, “We want cattle that are

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► Wehrmann Angus is known for complete cattle — cattle that will work in almost any environment.

structurally correct. When a cow is 8 [years old], I want her to look like she is 3.”

“We have raised some of those cattle, the good breeders have, but none of us have raised enough of them,” he says.

Mentors

McClung learned the principles of breeding, as well as some invaluable life lessons, from a series of mentors. First were his parents. “They hustled, set a good example and made us do things,” he recalls.

Next was one of his college professors, Harold Kidder. “In the ’60s, he was talking about the things we’re doing now,” McClung says.

Then there was Conrad Grove. McClung bought 35 Angus cows and an interest in a bull from the Downingtown, Pa., breeder. “He had a tremendous influence,” he states.

And it is a rare cattle-breeding conversation when McClung doesn’t quote South Dakota Angus breeder Martin Jorgensen. The respect is mutual.

“Richard has always had a vision to build a herd that is second-to-none,” Jorgensen says. “He planned it early in his life and has stuck with it. He has bred for honest production and ignored the fads many purebred breeders fall for.

“It was a very courageous thing to do and has turned out to be very profitable,” he adds.

Although Nick Wehrmann, McClung’s employer for the last 25 years, didn’t start out as a cattleman, McClung credits him with a great deal of his success with Wehrmann Angus.

“He is one of the brightest men I’ve ever known and has had a very big, positive influence on my life,” McClung says. “He has a tremendous capacity to do a lot of work. He has learned the cattle business and is a hands-on owner. We have contact almost every day.”

Surprisingly, even though McClung is a take-charge kind of person, he says cattle operations work best when the owner is closely involved.

“You may have disagreements and may not get everything you want, but the middle ground is probably better anyway,” he maintains. “Plus, if the owner is involved, you don’t have to tell them when times are tough. They already know.”

Once again, the respect is mutual. “Richard’s perseverance and hard work and his adherence to principles we both believe in have made him a successful cattle breeder,” Wehrmann says.

He adds, “His loyalty is very important.

A forum for shared ideas

The Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) was created in 1968 because of confusion.

Ronnie Silcox, University of Georgia animal scientist and former executive director of BIF, explains, “The state Beef Cattle Improvement associations (BCIAs) got started in the late ’50s, as well as some of the older bull test stations. In the early ’60s, the breed associations started developing their performance programs. These different state organizations and breed associations were going in different directions. BIF was created as a place where all the different organizations involved in beef cattle performance programs could come together to share ideas.”

Not only did the different groups share ideas, but they also created guidelines for performance testing.

“Believe it or not, in the very early meetings leading to the formation of BIF, one of the big controversies was what age to use to adjust weaning weights,” Silcox says. “Thirty-five years later, we take it for granted that it is 205 days, but that was one of the first things BIF standardized.

“Now, if you go back through the 35-year history, BIF has made it easy for all different segments of the industry to communicate with each other,” Silcox continues. “BIF has standardized the terminology. The breed associations have similar systems. Commercial producers can look at reports from different breed associations and still read them. An EPD (expected progeny difference) is an EPD.

“As an Extension specialist, if somebody calls and wants to know how to calculate a frame score or a weaning weight, I look it up in the BIF guidelines,” he adds.

“BIF essentially set the standards for all of us to use so there wouldn’t be a lot of confusion about how performance data was calculated and what it meant,” agrees John Crouch, executive vice president of the American Angus Association.

Virginia Tech animal scientist Scott Greiner says he looks to BIF to provide the performance guidelines for the four state BCIA central bull tests. “Then, commercial producers can have confidence that the data has been collected in a standardized fashion,” he explains.

However, Silcox says one of the most important functions of BIF is education, specifically through its annual meeting. “What makes BIF such a unique organization is it is a mix and blend of the different purebred organizations, commercial producers, university researchers and Extension people. The annual meeting is not just an academic meeting and not just a producer meeting, but all different segments come together.”

Greiner adds, “Those of us in Extension and genetic evaluation look to BIF and the annual meeting as our source of cutting-edge information.”

Still, BIF president and Angus breeder Richard McClung says, “The last few BIF meetings have dealt with subjects a grassroots commercial or registered producer can take home and use. They have become more producer-friendly.”

For more information on BIF and the annual meeting, scheduled for May 28-31 in Lexington, Ky., visit www.BIFconference.com.



He is loyal to me as his employer and loyal to his customers. It speaks well for both of us because we look at things the same way."

The McClung-Wehrmann success has not been lost on their peers. In 1997, Wehrmann Angus was named the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Seedstock Producer of the Year, along with co-winner Thomas Angus Ranch of Baker, Ore.

"We were flattered," McClung states.

He has also served as president of BIF this past year, and takes pride in last year's annual meeting on beef cow efficiency, which he helped plan.

"Martin Jorgensen was one of the founding fathers of BIF," McClung says. "He says he had never been so impressed with a meeting in his life — it was like a hog meeting. He said people realize we're raising food."

Dedication

Between his quest to breed the complete cow, and industry work like BIF, McClung has little time for anything else. There is his wife of 35 years, Susan, who works in the office of a group of six veterinarians, including an embryologist.

They raised three children, Dick, Casey and Becky, but none of them are involved in the cattle business. "They grew up with the cattle, worked hard at it and were very, very good at it," McClung says. "But I work seven days a week. They didn't want to do that.

"Labor is one of the biggest problems facing the industry," he comments. "I don't know where the people are going to come from to do this job."

The seven-day work week and the all-encompassing focus on cattle have left no time for hobbies, but that's OK with him. "I don't want to ever completely retire," he says.

However, when pressed, he admits he would enjoy more time in the saddle of a working cow horse. And there are the Border collies — a yard and kennel full, including rare, bearded Border collies.

"One of our good customers gave me the opportunity to own a couple of them," McClung explains. "We bred them and scattered the puppies around to people who would use them."

But when asked how he wants people to remember him, it is always the cattle that he zeroes in on. "I want people to say, 'He was pretty good at what he did. He raised cattle that made a difference,'" McClung says.

With his Border collie ways, he has already done just that.



BIF 2003 Is May 28-31

The 2003 Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Annual Meeting and Convention is scheduled for May 28-31, 2003, at the Hyatt Downtown in Lexington, Ky. It is being sponsored by the University of Kentucky, the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association (KCA) and the Kentucky Department of Agriculture.



The tentative agenda includes:

WEDNESDAY, MAY 28

5:00 p.m. Welcome reception

7:30 p.m. National Association of Animal Breeders symposium

THURSDAY, MAY 29

8:00 a.m. Welcome

8:15 a.m. Surviving Environmental Challenges

Moderator: Tom Jenkins, U.S. Department of Agriculture Meat Animal Research Center

►Beef Production in Adverse Environments, Carl Hoveland, University of Georgia

►Clinical Mode of Action and Genomic Potential in Fescue, Richard Browning, Tennessee State University

9:45 a.m. Break

►Management of Beef Production in an Adverse Environment, Jim Gerrish, Brookfield, Mo.

►Questions and summation

Noon BIF Recognition luncheon

2:00 p.m. Roundtable discussions

►Emerging Technologies

►Selection Decisions

►Cow Herd Efficiency

Evening Kentucky Night Out

FRIDAY, MAY 30

8:00 a.m. Traits to Dollars

Moderator: Craig Huffines, American Hereford Association

►Panel discussion: What will the target be?

— Rick Carlson, PM Beef Group

— Glen Dolezal, Excel

— John Tobe, Laura's Lean Beef

— Joe Bill Meng, Creekstone Farm

9:00 a.m. Questions and discussion

9:30 a.m. Break

►Available Tools for Making Genetic Change, Tom Fields, Colorado State University

►How Best to Achieve Genetic Change, Dorian Garrick, Colorado State University

11:30 a.m. Questions and summation

Noon BIF awards luncheon

2:00 p.m. Roundtable discussions

►Producer Application

►Genetic Prediction

►Live Animal, Carcass and End Point

Evening Night on the town, dinner on your own

SATURDAY, MAY 31

Kentucky Tours — Optional tours showcasing Kentucky's beef industry and heritage will be available.

The meeting registration fee after May 1 is \$120; the tour registration is \$50. To obtain registration materials, contact the KCA, 176 Pasadena Dr., Lexington, KY 40503; or Darrh Bullock, University of Kentucky, 804 WP Garrigus Bldg., Lexington, KY 40506-0215 or (859) 257-7514. Registration materials will be available online at www.beefimprovement.org and www.BIFconference.com.

For more information, contact Jim Akers at the KCA at (859) 278-0899.

Real-time coverage

Angus Productions Inc. (API), publisher of the *Angus Journal* and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, will provide real-time coverage of the meeting at www.BIFconference.com. Boehringer Ingelheim Vetmedica, Inc., is again sponsoring the coverage; and *BEEF* magazine is providing a portal to the site through www.beefcowcalf.com, its producer resource Web site.

Producers can visit www.BIFconference.com now to view the meeting schedule, revisit last year's meeting and download registration materials. The site will be updated with overviews of the seedstock and commercial "producer of the year" nominees and more details about the breakout sessions and available tours.

API staff will provide coverage during the meeting, posting summaries and proceedings of the presentations. Audios will be available, allowing producers who can't attend the option of listening to the speakers at their convenience.

API will post to the site links to pertinent feature stories and research papers, making www.BIFconference.com your portal to cutting-edge genetic information.