



TROY SMITH PHOTOS

a similar course to hogs in that there was more profit potential when you were paid for carcass merit," offers Paul. "With hogs, we had to identify and use the genetic lines that produced the most consistent, high-yielding carcasses. We wanted to take the same approach to go after the potential premiums available for consistently high-quality beef.

"Consistency of the end product is what you want, and we felt Angus genetics could get us there. And we could select for consistency using high-accuracy Angus EPDs," he adds.

**Angus genetics aren't new** to the operation. The Sedlaceks' father, Erwin, established a Hereford-Angus crossbreeding program in 1962. For the past decade, however, his sons have used only Angus bulls. That's about the time that EPDs began to figure prominently into their selection process.

LAP Farms raises corn, soybeans and alfalfa on 1,800 acres of cultivated land. Crop residues and hay supplement the rough hill pastures that support a herd of about 220 commercial cows. Their calves are finished at home, along with the 200-300 calves that are purchased annually. The Sedlaceks keep only home-raised females as replacements, and they've started selling a few packages of heifers.

Opportunities to market commercial breeding stock came about as buyers recognized the improved and more consistent quality of Sedlacek heifers. For that, Paul credits selection for balanced traits. Not forgotten is the need for fertile, feminine females, but Paul believes "replacement quality" can be enhanced while reaching for optimum feeding performance and positive carcass traits in steers and market heifers.

"We've always liked the idea of pushing the cattle we feed. In fact, Dad was doing it in the '70s, back before you saw very many calf-feds," tells Paul. "We used to finish steers at about 18 months of age, weighing 1,100 pounds (lb.). The carcass traits were acceptable, I think, but we sold them live."

**When the Sedlaceks first sold** some cattle on a carcass basis, they weren't satisfied with what the data told them. Quality and yield were too variable. The consistency they wanted wasn't there. So they adjusted their sites, aiming high, to a target of "70-70-zero."

"We wanted to boost our yearling weight for sure, so we could push the cattle and

## LAP FARMS: Using EPDs to Build CONSISTENCY

*This Nebraska herd is reaping the rewards of using expected progeny differences (EPDs) as the foundation to a strong, well-balanced, targeted selection program.*

BY TROY SMITH

The Sedlacek family has been in the hog business for generations. Family forebears came to northern Nebraska in 1892, and, chances are, hogs helped to put meat on the table and pay the bills. Old-timers called them "mortgage lifters."

Hogs evolved into a mainstay for the current generation's diversified farming and livestock operation. Brothers Lawrence, Alan and Paul Sedlacek carried on the tradition through their family corporation, LAP Farms, located near Spencer.

More recently, however, pork production has become one of animal agriculture's least rewarding pursuits. So the Sedlaceks are phasing out their farrow-to-finish

enterprise. The sows are gone already. As soon as the last crop of pigs is finished and marketed, LAP Farms will be out of the hog business.

**What's the purpose** of presenting this bit of Sedlacek hog history? Well, the brothers run cattle, too, and they believe that their pork production experience is making them better cattlemen. Actually, the breeding and feeding of cattle is just as much a family tradition, but lessons learned from the highly competitive pork business are being applied to the increasingly competitive business of producing beef.

"We could see the cattle market following

**Above: Adjusting his sights higher, Paul Sedlacek believes it's possible to breed for calf crops where all of the heifers are of replacement quality and 100% of the steers will grade Choice.**

have them finished at a little heavier weight, but at a younger age,” explains Paul. “And then the goal was to have 70% grade Choice, 70% [Yield Grade (YG)] 1s and 2s, and zero outliers. And do that every time.”

After a decade of using EPDs as part of the sire selection process, Paul says the goal hasn't quite been reached in every respect. Still, Sedlacek cattle now finish at 14-15 months of age, weighing about 1,200 lb. Summarized data from the last two years tell more of the story.

**1997 averages, 195 head:**

- 81% USDA Choice & Prime
- 78% YG 1 or 2
- 22% YG 3
- 35% Met *Certified Angus Beef*™ specs

**1998 averages, 197 head:**

- 93% USDA Choice & Prime
- 55% YG 1 or 2
- 45% YG 3
- 34% Met *Certified Angus Beef* specs

The Sedlaceks are pleased with the level and consistency of quality but concerned about the variability of yield. Unfortunately, some variable conditions affecting yield, such as shrink, are sometimes difficult to control. Paul says he would like to reduce the number of YG 3 carcasses, but he is pleased with the fact that no YG 4s have been sold during the past three years.

**Still in pursuit of that** ideal combination of practical performance and carcass merit, Paul says the most important thing to remember is to avoid extremes. Seeking balance in potential artificial insemination (AI) sires or bulls used for natural service, he looks for EPDs that fit within parameters set for each trait.

For weaning weight, the range is +25 to +45 lb. Acceptable values for yearling weight range from +50 to +80 lb. Where birth weight is concerned, Paul isn't afraid of a +6 value for bulls used on mature cows. For heifers, however, he looks for numbers less than +2.

“We've tried to look for positive carcass EPDs for marbling and ribeye area,” adds Paul. “Nothing extreme there either, especially on the ribeye area, or you pay for it with hard-doing females. For the same reason, we look for moderate milk EPDs — a range of +10 to +20.”

Before buying a bull, Paul studies the EPDs of his sire and the dam's sire, too, wanting to find high-accuracy numbers stacked in the pedigree. Noting the positive correlation between sire scrotal circumference and early puberty in daughters, Paul says he never buys a bull whose scrotal circumference is less than 34



**Increasing uniformity and consistency of Sedlacek cattle is showing up in the feedlot and on the packer's rail. In recent years more than 30% of home-raised cattle have met *Certified Angus Beef*™ specifications. Paul Sedlacek believes 40% is an attainable goal.**



**From left is Bret Sedlacek, who works for LAP Farms, the family corporation formed by his father, Lawrence, and uncles Alan and Paul.**

centimeters. He also evaluates the dam's calving interval as an indicator of fertility.

“The EPDs and records help identify the bulls I want to see, but I never buy bulls strictly by the numbers. I definitely want to see them,” Paul offers. “You still have to visually appraise them for soundness, of course, and I want to see straightness of top, depth of rib and overall muscle — especially thickness. Thickness can be a little hard to find.”

**Some people will say** you can't get performance; carcass quality; and fertile, easy-fleshing females in the same genetic package. Paul disagrees. He and his brothers have improved the way their cattle feed, as well as the quality of beef they produce. And Sedlacek females get better every year.

“We wanted cows with moderate frame. For our environment, a mature cow weighing 1,150 pounds is about right,” Paul explains. “We've culled females hard for udder quality, and that has improved a lot. But what we've really noticed during the last couple of years is the overall uniformity of our replacements. We've tried to stick with

uniform bull-buying specifications and our calf crops are steadily becoming more uniform.”

With the hogs on the way out, Sedlaceks want to expand their cattle-feeding enterprise. That means buying more calves, but they want to scrutinize potential purchases so they compare favorably with home-raised calves. That means buying from Angus-based herds with histories. It probably means buying from producers whose genetics reflect a similar approach to selection for balanced EPDs.

“We didn't grasp EPDs as soon as we should have, but using them has really helped,” Paul adds. “We should have used them sooner to help minimize the differences in our cattle and breed for more consistency.”

“Now our goal is to market every steer on a grid and consistently earn premiums, so we're aiming for 100% Choice,” grins Paul. “I'd like to boost our [*Certified Angus Beef*] qualifiers to a consistent 40%. I think that's attainable. I'd like to see every heifer we raise be of replacement quality, too. And I don't think that's unrealistic.”

