

# BCIA Boosts Bull Market

Virginia BCIA bull tests are a boon for purebred breeders.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

**T**he Virginia Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA) may be bumping the 50-year mark, but it is by no means over the hill, especially its bull test program.

"In the last five years, we've tested between 402 to 470 bulls a year. This past year it was 420," says Scott Greiner, Virginia BCIA educational advisor and Virginia Tech animal scientist.

The December 2003 sale of senior bulls marked the 46th sale year for the Culpeper test. Junior bulls sell there in April. At Wytheville, both junior and senior bulls sell in March.

Angus breeder C.W. Pratt is grateful for both tests. He began consigning bulls when the Wytheville test opened in 1980. Now, he tests 20 bulls a year in the junior and senior tests at both locations.

"We've topped all four tests," Pratt says. "In December, at Culpeper we had the top three selling bulls. Our seven bulls averaged \$2,925, and we sold a \$4,000 bull. You've got to have some luck in bull tests, but I feel strongly the BCIA got us pointed in the right direction."

Pratt's relationship with BCIA started in 1972.

"Dr. Ike Eller, head of the Virginia BCIA (now retired), was on a program at the Virginia Angus Field Day. He asked me if I was serious about raising Angus cattle," Pratt recalls. "I said I thought I was. He said I needed to get a set of scales and keep performance records."

Pratt did. At the time, he had 26 cows. Now he runs 220 cows and apparently put the scales and records to good use while he was expanding. Not only does he top the Virginia bull test sales on a regular basis, but his Echo Ridge Farm also has several bulls at artificial insemination (AI) studs.

Pratt admits his operation is big enough to justify its own bull sale. He does test and sell around 40 bulls a year off his place, but, he says, "I still like the idea of comparing my bulls to other bulls."

Still, the real value of the program is for small-scale and midsize breeders. "They are the ones that need the guidance and the opportunity to test and sell their bulls," he says, adding that the

majority of the breeders in Virginia have 15 to 25 cows.

"In the age of embryo transfer and AI, the small breeders' cattle are probably as good as the big breeders' cattle," he adds. "They have the opportunity to select from the same genetics."

However, he says, it takes more than genetics. "If it hadn't been for Ike encouraging me and pointing me in the right direction, I don't know if we would have gotten along as well as we have."

## Building a program

Pratt says many of the larger-scale breeders got their starts with the BCIA sales but now host their own sales. "I don't know what the future is for the tests. The bigger breeders would like to eliminate the BCIA sales."

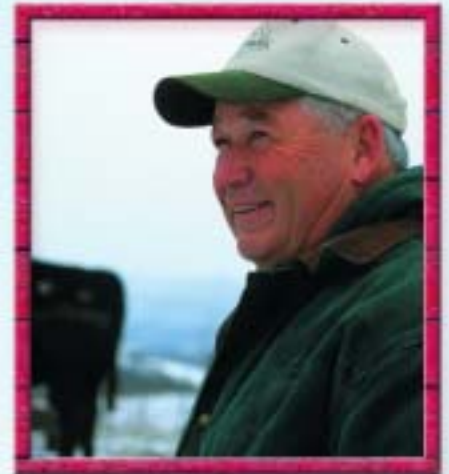
Greiner says the bull test and BCIA committees — made up of seedstock breeders, commercial producers and Extension people — are doing all they can to ensure the bull tests have a future. They focus on making the changes they need to stay current with the industry. "We'll continue to try to keep the tests cutting edge," Greiner says.

"In the early days, the primary object was to collect growth and average daily gain (ADG) data under common conditions so you could make selection decisions based on that data," Greiner explains. "Those measurements are still important but have

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► Virginia Tech animal scientist Scott Greiner says the Virginia BCIA bull testing program has evolved with the cattle industry.



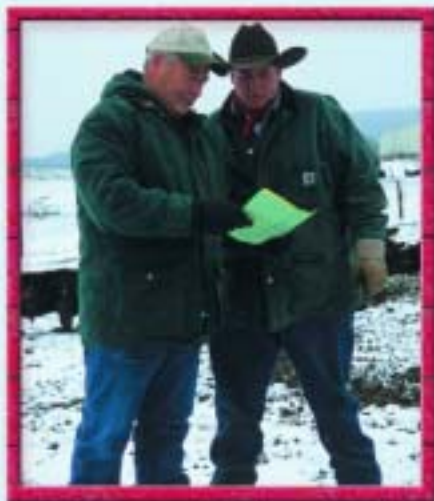
► C.W. Pratt often tops the Virginia BCIA bull tests with his performance Angus cattle.



► Pratt attributes the Virginia BCIA bull test program for much of the marketing success he has had with his herd.

evolved with EPDs (expected progeny differences). Now, that is done in the context of breeder contemporary groups on the farm or in central tests. That data is still important, but how we use it has evolved.”

He adds, “There are now a significant number of smaller breeders who utilize bull



►Pratt and his son, Jason, study weigh sheets from the Wytheville BCIA bull test.

tests for their entire contemporary groups. We do all we can do to enable them to maintain those meaningful contemporary groups through the context of the bull test stations.”

The BCIA bull test committee also tries to make it feasible for breeders to send those groups by keeping costs down. Greiner says test costs are usually \$350-\$420 per bull, depending on the test and location. For bulls that are sale eligible, additional fees may be \$230-\$270. This includes all blood tests, feed and yardage until the sale, the sale preparation fee, and a sale expense of 9%-12% of the sale price.

One of the latest committee-approved changes is the addition of a minimum yearling weight EPD for bulls in the sale. “One of the components of the state feeder calf program is the calves have to be sired by bulls with a minimum growth EPD so they can be tagged as Virginia Quality Assurance (VQA) calves,” Greiner says.

One of the biggest differences Greiner has noticed in his five years with the BCIA is the focus on carcass merit. “Our definition of quality has changed.”

Commercial producer Tim Sutphin says



►Dublin, Va., commercial producer Tim Sutphin buys 75% of his natural-service sires from Virginia BCIA bull tests.

the bull tests have evolved, and the quality of the bulls in the tests has improved. “I’m a huge supporter of the BCIA tests,” says the Dublin, Va., cattleman, who adds that 75% of the bulls he uses natural service come through the test stations. “That’s the best way to buy bulls.”

The way the bulls are managed is a plus, Sutphin says. “You can see some real differences between bulls. And I like to see the comparisons between breeders.”

He agrees with the addition of more carcass information on test bulls. “I like the ultrasound information. We won’t buy a bull without it.” With good reason: He sends all calves, minus the replacement heifers, from his 550-head cow herd to a feedlot in Nebraska for custom feeding.

“Ten or 15 years ago I’d look through the [sale book] and see two or three bulls I wanted. I’d have to pay \$3,500 to \$4,000 for them. Now the purebred breeders are breeding more and more of the right kind of bulls, and I don’t have to pay that much for them.”

While Pratt would probably just as soon get the higher prices, he says the test sales help establish prices for private-treaty sales.

The results from the infusion of top-quality test bulls into commercial herds is apparent, Pratt says. “I’m a state grader. Since the Wytheville station started in this area, it has really improved the quality of the cattle.”

He points to the minimum EPD requirement for bulls that sire VQA-tagged calves. “That program is really growing, and we’re seeing as much as a dime premium over straight sale barn cattle.”

However, Pratt still sees the most obvious benefits of the BCIA bull tests in his own operation. “The BCIA program has made our program. If we hadn’t tested our bulls, I don’t know if anybody would have known about us.”

