# Ace in the Hole

## With a vision of constant improvement, Blake Huntley wins the 2005 CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award.

*Story & photos by* ***Steve Suther***

► These heifers should be some of Blake Huntley's best. All are out of cows known to have produced at least one USDA Choice calf.

► Huntley's goal is to have a uniform herd of excellence, but some cows stand out. Red tag 115 looks ordinary, but her progeny average Small[50] marbling and 17-in. ribeyes with 0.26 in. of back fat, the last one selling for $1,442. "She shows that it can be done," he says.

There are a lot of cows in the Big Hole Basin of southwestern Montana. Only the best thrive and also produce calves that perform in the feedlot and on the rail. They don't just show up by accident. Blake Huntley, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) award winner, says such cows come from commitment to a goal. Then, individual animal data can find the right bulls to produce the right cows. In the end, he says, "it's all about the cows."

Eighty years ago, grandfather Ralph Huntley and his brothers started a mixed Hereford herd in the flood-irrigated valley near Wisdom, Mont.

Blake Huntley's parents, Clayton and Barbara, took over ranch management in 1950. By the 1960s, they began using red and black Angus to add pigment. The resulting baldies were later crossed with Charolais bulls for more pounds. While selection was always important, there was virtually no data.

The same was true on the female side, but the Huntleys used cowboy logic to refine the herd. "Peewee calves" were turned back out to find cows for culling. Replacement heifers were selected as yearlings by visual appraisal and open discussion, though nobody knew their genetics.

Cow herds grew all across the Big Hole Basin, and so did haying to feed cows in the deep snow from December to May. By the 1970s, it was the "Land of 10,000 Haystacks," Huntley says. Ranchers found not all cows could live on hay half the year and remain profitable.

In 1981, Huntley graduated from Montana State University, and the next year he married Brenda. They set up ranching on a 20,000-acre spread near Dell, Mont., with cattle from the headquarters 80 miles northwest. The new place included 3,600 deeded acres, but was not nearly as productive as the home ranch, where 7,000 acres were irrigated. Public land rules limited the Dell ranch to 400 pairs.

The south ranch added diversity and room for the future. Huntley's father and his brother-in-law Tony Monaco ran the home place with some help, while Blake and Brenda's family grew to include Brandee, Brian and Blaine.

### A CAB connection

Huntley managed the first- and second-calf crossbreds, in which calving problems were common yet unpredictable. Angus bulls only helped a little until expected progeny differences (EPDs) became widely available in the late 1980s. That's about the time Huntley began to take on overall ranch management responsibility.

Using EPDs, he turned to Traveler 1148-line bulls from Rollin' Rock and Gartner-Denowh, both of Sidney, Mont., to add

mothering and milk with low birth weights. As Huntley was trying to learn more about Angus cattle, a seminar sparked his interest.

The CAB Partners in Profit Conference in Billings, Mont., in September 1988 let Huntley hear from then-CAB Director Mick Colvin, as well as future American Angus Association Executive Vice President John Crouch and Cargill-Excel packer Dell Allen. What he remembers most, however, is the talk by CAB restaurateur Edd Hendee, who founded the "Taste of Texas" steak house chain.

"He used to cater to anyone who walked in the door, with everything from Mexican to Chinese to Italian food," Huntley recalls. "The restaurant didn't stand out, and since Edd didn't know who would show up to order, he couldn't manage inventory — he threw a lot of food away. So, Edd decided to be known for one thing: the best steak in Texas. And, he went with *Certified Angus Beef*®."

Huntley saw parallels in ranching. Where Hendee had been blindly producing all kinds of meals, hoping to satisfy consumers, ranchers were producing calves with little focus on consumers.

"I saw what really creates value in the food chain, and decided then to produce for the CAB market," Huntley says.

But how to do it was still not clear. After consulting with then-American Angus Association Regional Manager Bruce Weeter, Huntley drafted a form letter offering heifers for progeny testing bulls by artificial insemination (AI) in exchange for the semen. Sending it to a dozen Montana breeders, he only heard back from Stevenson-Basin, Hobson, Mont. The next spring, he started AIing.

"I was excited about being a 'partner for profit,'" he says. The first heifers were bred to Basin Rainmaker DS 380U, tested against QAS Traveler 23-4. All Angus-sired heifers that next year received orange tags to help with sorting.

Through progeny testing, Huntley started tagging and weighing individually at weaning, and also got the first carcass data. "I didn't know what to do with it at the time," he admits, "but I kept it."

Brenda computerized the herd records, which allowed heifer selection by index. It was a step away from guessing, but looking back, Huntley says, "we were still off on some rabbit trails."

That became more obvious when some of those ratio-selected replacements turned up 200 pounds (lb.) heavier than average as mature cows. He began to come in off the rabbit trails in 1993, realizing that, until then, the herd had been built on bull power alone.

**"We could breed a poor cow to the best bull out there and it would take a long time to improve her line ... We could take a good cow and breed her to an average bull and still get a better-than-average calf."**

***—Blake Huntley***

"We are always on a learning curve. I learned that you can prove a bull with your cows, but that led me to focus on the cows. I started going through all the data and seeing what cows matched up with Choice and CAB carcasses and which ones were top performers, no matter what bull they were bred to," he says. "I saw a big correlation between CAB acceptance and the orange-tag cows and thought, 'Wow, if a cow's got it, she's got it.'

"We could breed a poor cow to the best bull out there and it would take a long time to improve her line, so we were better off culling her," Huntley continues. "We could take a good cow and breed her to an average bull and still get a better-than-average calf. So, we culled harder on the tail end."

► Huntley's herd target is a modern, highly fertile, 1,250-lb., low-input cow that will produce 90% Choice or better YG 2s, with as many achieving CAB acceptance as possible. "There are some challenges in doing that here," he says, "as we always have to keep the cow functional first."

## Selection challenges

To make it easier to sort for the first cow-AI-breeding program, Huntley freeze-branded a "C" on any cow that had CAB progeny, and a "T" on those with top-gaining progeny, noting the few with both marks.

"I tried breeding 40 or 50 cows to one bull, the next 40 to another bull, and so on, to even out the herd," Huntley says. "That was only possible because of the data." With most of the herd still subject to natural service, freeze-branding gave way to use of double ear tags, color-coded by birth year.

Heifer selection evolved to consider both the sire and dam, skipping over the heaviest 10%.

The increasingly management-intensive programs didn't fit the Dell ranch. "It took a couple days to move cows seven miles to work, another day to work them and another day to put them back," Huntley says. "We could work 1,500 cows on the home place in that time."

And, though Huntley had invested in proving his management was ecologically sound, new restrictions still loomed that would cut ranch capacity in half. By 1997, it was no longer worth the fight, but the challenge brought more opportunities.

Most of the cows — and up to 1,500 yearlings — still made it through the winter on hay in the basin, but a cost-price squeeze convinced Huntley to find ways to graze and market calves in the fall. He sold the Dell ranch with a continuing lease that expired in 2001, and subsequently leased a 2,800-acre

CONTINUED ON PAGE 120

## Ace in the Hole CONTINUED FROM PAGE 119

► Blake Huntley (left), runs the 2,000-cow ranch with help from his brother-in-law and cattle manager Tony Monaco and his father, Clayton.

riverside ranch for winter grazing and calving near Dillon. Big round bales had replaced stacks in the mid-1990s, and the enterprise was further curtailed.

"Now, our cows rustle for forage 11 to 12 months of the year," Huntley says. "The Dillon place gave us 2.5 tons of forage per acre, on the stump, late October to late May. We truck hay down there as needed."

When all 1,600 Huntley cows moved down to Dillon for the winter, efficiency headed in the right direction. Cows coming back were not overly thin. On the contrary, as Huntley weighed cows, he found the heavy outliers and began selecting heifers with added criteria for percentage of body weight weaned.

"The next year, I was nervous at having changed our heifer selection and giving them no extra hay as 2-year-olds," he says. "But where we used to have 10% or more open in the fall after a 60-day season, that dropped to 5% and has stayed there for four years." Winter-grazing freed thousands of acres that had been hay meadow for decades and allowed room for 500 more pairs for summer grazing.

### Moving mountains

As Huntley extends the feed-efficiency challenge to yearling heifers, he works closely with North Platte Feeders Inc. (NPF) to track data on herdmates. The CAB partner feedlot south of North Platte, Neb., nominated Huntley for the annual award and will finish his AI-sired steers this fall.

"It's hard to find another producer who knows his costs, genetics and the industry as well as Blake," says Turk Stovall, NPF customer services representative. "He has literally moved mountains to improve his cattle while aiming at the CAB target. He tells us he still has far to go, but that's just because he always has his sights set on the horizon."

Huntley works with Stovall to find more answers and correlations between the ranch and the feedlot. "We feed depending on the market," he notes. "If the calf market falls out of bed, we may feed them all next time. But even when we sell, we have been able to get some data back from buyers the last few years. We keep pursuing the data, and when we see how our calves do in different yards, it validates our health program."

Feedlot and carcass data combine with herd fertility trends to guide bull selection, and Huntley maintains sire groups within a string of 120 registered Angus bulls to back up the AI programs. A standing contract with Virginia-based Ginger Hill Angus, Washington, fills most annual bull needs, and Iowa-based GG Genetics plays an important role, too.

"They both have Montana genetics, and the bulls work great up here (at 6,200 feet)," Huntley says. A couple of years ago, he also joined a local consortium in Future Genetics LLC, which owns a line of CA Future Direction 5321 sons, some currently on progeny test. In 2003, steer progeny from a GAR Precision 1680 son achieved a 39% CAB-acceptance rate at NPF.

AI is still the basis for core herd improvement, and Huntley reinstated a cow AI program that year to go with the heifer program that never took a break.

The criteria for cows getting into the AI herd is set high, but more cows are meeting it. Finding a specific 600 pairs out of 2,000 that calve in random order has been a challenge, since AI pairs must be grouped on the same semi-trailers back to the basin.

Last year, the family painstakingly sorted an ideal set to try a new synchronization program. A lot can go wrong in a project of that size. Last fall, pregnancy rates were 90% among those 600 top-end cows, but 95% on natural-service cows. Huntley took action.

This year, he found breeding candidates mainly by exclusion to spread the risk. Then he found the Vanek family — Leonard, Diane, Pam and Danny — specialists in natural AI heat detection and breeding from Red Lodge, Mont. They agreed to virtually live next to 535 cows for 21 days, which could lead to 80% AI pregnancies compared to last year's 56%. Meanwhile, Huntley hired the best technician he could find to give synchronization a more thorough test on 150 cows.

"If 15 of them are open this fall, I will have to say that system doesn't work for me," Huntley says. "I won't say 90% conception is always a problem — it depends on your goals," he adds. "You can bring the preg rate up by throwing hay at the cows or leaving bulls in longer, but there are costs associated with both. And, sometimes you need to apply pressure and find out which cows fall through the cracks.

"I am trying to get a very modern, 1,250-pound, highly fertile, very low-input cow that will produce 90% Choice or better Yield Grade (YG) 2s, with as many CABs as we can get," Huntley says. "There are some challenges in doing that here, as we always have to keep the cow functional first."

The ideal is "a cow that I can breed to performance bulls and still keep the carcass quality," Huntley says. "I am years away from the ideal, but I know where I'm headed. This takes commitment; it takes time. But, once the right cows are out there, even if they're not in the AI group, the herd produces what we want and keeps getting better." AJ