



# Commercial School of Thought

Producer of the year practices what he preaches.

by Barb Baylor Anderson

**K**en Nimrick has no doubt in his mind, professionally or personally, that Angus genetics provide increased productivity for commercial beef producers — and he practices what he preaches. The Western Illinois University (WIU) beef cattle professor and his wife, Sara, were recently named 2006 Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Commercial Producers of the Year.

“Angus genes are a necessity in any commercial program,” he says. “You need the maternal and carcass quality features to be a low-cost, efficient producer. Angus has to be part of the mix.”

Ken and Sara operate Pitchfork Farm near Stronghurst, Ill., a grain and commercial beef cattle operation with 220 cow-calf pairs and 35 replacement heifers on 620 acres, with 340 acres in permanent and rotational pasture. The Nimricks have a few registered Angus females in the herd as well.

In addition, Ken teaches animal science, manages the WIU cow herd, conducts research on beef management and grazing systems, supervises the WIU Bull Test Station, and organizes and hosts the Western Illinois Grazing Conference. He speaks at various beef industry events and grazing programs, serves the Illinois Beef Association as a member of the research committee and ex officio board member, and is a lifetime member of the American Angus Association.

## Cow herd composition

For 12 years the Nimrick’s genetic program has centered on composite bulls that are 50%-75% Angus and 25%-50% Simmental or Gelbvieh. As a result, most of the cow herd has a similar genetic composition, which simplifies crossbreeding. First-calf heifers are synchronized and artificially inseminated (AIed) to calving-ease Angus bulls followed with similar-type cleanup bulls for 45 days.

Additionally, the Nimricks select sires that will improve deficient traits.

“We want a trouble-free, low-labor calving season. We feel growth and milk are adequate in our herd, so we have begun to

place more emphasis on traits that are important to our low-input system, such as moderate frame size, body capacity and fleshing ability, thickness, masculinity/femininity, mammary structure, and disposition,” he says. “We also place more emphasis on carcass EPDs (expected progeny differences) and scan information.”

Ken uses estrus synchronization and limits the length of the breeding season for his mature cow herd. He prefers to calve heifers and cows from late April to late June so a number of the heifers and all the Pitchfork Farm cows calve strictly on pasture.

## Forage focus

“We try and provide the most productive, highest-quality pastures to allow the cow herd to maximize genetic potential,” he says. “Our pastures consist of a combination of endophyte-infected, fescue-based pastures and improved alfalfa-orchard grass or ryegrass/endophyte-free fescue/white clover mixtures. We also have a pasture with ‘friendly’ endophyte fescue.”

The incorporation of improved pasture species and rotational grazing has increased pasture performance and carrying capacity. Ken maintains complete records on grazing days in each pasture to monitor feed

availability and evaluate grass varieties and other pasture management practices. Then, he can adjust decisions on grazing schedules, reseeding and fertility.

“Hay is extremely expensive to produce and reduces the potential for a profitable enterprise,” he says of his financial results from the Illinois Standardized Performance Analysis (SPA) Program. “Very little to no hay is harvested. We expand the grazing period with cool-season annuals like oats, rye or triticale and cornstalk grazing. To help fill the slump during July and August, we use summer annuals like sorghum-Sudan or standing field corn as needed.”

January through March, Ken reduces the cost of wintering cows by grazing the standing corn. He uses strip-grazing, so cows consume approximately 9 pounds (lb.) of corn each day. He supplements that with corn gluten feed three times per week.

## Manage for profit

“The program is low-labor and easy-to-manage, with about 15 to 20 minutes per day needed to handle the entire herd,” he says. “Cost to winter the cows is only 37¢ to 50¢ per cow per day.”

Illinois SPA records help him keep other costs under control as well. Ken tries to keep total cost per cow per year less than \$215, feed cost per cow per year less than \$145, weaned calf cost of production less than \$63 per hundredweight (cwt.), and calf sold after backgrounding less than \$54 per cwt.

Since 1972, Ken has had the herd on a performance-testing program. He annually identifies animals, and he records individual birth dates, weaning weights and group sale weights. University of Illinois Farm Business Farm Management system records since 1972 have provided insight into management practices that increase grazing days and improve profitability compared to using harvested feeds. Grazing forages are more profitable than row crop enterprises, so the Nimricks have been converting more acres each year from crops to grass.



► BIF honored Pitchfork Farm, Stronghurst, Ill., as the 2006 Commercial Producer of the Year. Pictured are Sara (left) and Ken Nimrick.


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“We utilize management-intensive grazing (MiG), converting much of the cropland into pasture, and we installed erosion control structures. We are also in the process of developing natural springs and extending waterlines to various areas to eliminate using ponds and streams,” he says.

Early on, the Nimricks adopted weaning at 75-135 days in the first part of September. “Our experience is that these early-weaned calves are very efficient and stay healthy with a good preconditioning program,” he says. “Following weaning, we background calves until midwinter and sell them through a preconditioned feeder calf sale. We monitor feedlot performance

and carcass quality, as well, by selling one or two loads of cattle at a commercial lot each year.”

As the Nimricks focus on the future, Ken encourages Angus breeders to consider developing more EPDs related to the cost of production, including maintenance energy and feed efficiency.

“Our reproductive and growth traits are adequate. Now, we need to improve our convenience and carcass traits,” he says. “Nothing is ever perfect, and conditions always change. But we hope Angus producers can focus on even more traits relative to commercial production, so as seedstock customers we can meet the low-cost production needs of beef consumers.” 

## **Cost effectiveness is key**

The Commercial Producer of the Year Award has been presented to 35 cow-calf operations in the U.S. and Canada since 1972. Ken and Sara Nimrick own the first commercial cow-calf operation in Illinois to receive the award. Ken summarizes his operation's goals in the following mission statement.

*To maintain reproductive rates, while controlling feed and overhead expenses by improving and managing pastures, minimizing machinery and building expenses, utilizing a low-cost wintering program, and grazing as many days of the year as possible.*

Ken says investments in pastures, genetics and preventive health have been the most cost-effective for their operation, but he also says they are open-minded for the future and willing to try new ideas to further reduce costs and meet customer needs.

“We are thinking about grass-finishing some cattle as a niche market,” he says. “Angus will play an even bigger role in our operation then because of the benefits of those genetics on grass.”