

Balance Rules

Multi-trait selection helps Georgia producers find their niche.

Story & photos by *Becky Mills*



Carcass traits sell. So what do you do when you find out the herd you purchased churns out Choice and Prime calves? Stack those pedigrees even higher with the hope of producing the ultimate carcass bull?

Nope. Or, at least, not in John and Trish Stuedemann's Cold Spring Angus Farm herd. "Udders were the first thing we had to correct," Trish says. "We probably culled 20 cows the first year, and at least half of those were due to udders."

But, that was six years ago, when they

bought their Comer, Ga., farm and the 140 Angus cows in a package deal.

Now, aren't they just a little tempted to jump on the marbling bandwagon? Especially when six years of carcass data from 241 steers and heifers show 102 head, or 43%, made the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand?

"We don't single-trait-select," John states.

Disciplined culling

But, rewind again to the beginning. First, the Stuedemanns had to find out exactly

what they did have. Back in May 1999, before the farm and cows officially changed hands in July, John started helping the owner tattoo and weigh calves and weigh cows.

He and Trish followed up by collecting weaning weights. And, as soon as the calves were old enough, they sent the lower end of the calf crop to Iowa feedlots by way of the Georgia Beef Challenge, the state feedout program. This not only gave them a market for their calves, but returned feedlot and carcass information.

"The previous owner had worked very hard to emphasize carcass quality, but he didn't have the records to show it," John says. "We were very pleasantly surprised when the numbers started coming in."

Their on-farm production records showed more good news — the herd is a low-birth-weight herd. "Most of our customers want low birth weights," John comments.

Still, low-birth-weight expected progeny differences (EPDs) and positive carcass traits don't make a herd, or at least not this herd. Nothing gives a cow her walking papers faster than a bad attitude.

"We have two cows we need to cull now because of disposition problems," Trish says. "And, one of those is a Pathfinder cow."

"The hardest thing is to hold to your culling standards," she adds. The discipline is paying off, though.

"Almost everyone comments on how quiet our cattle are. When we first worked them, it sounded like a rodeo," she says. "My goal is to have every cow walk out of the chute, and that's about where we are now."

Quiet dispositions and low birth weights are necessities for the Stuedemanns and their customers. John works full-time as an animal scientist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) research station at Watkinsville, Ga. Before farm manager and herdsman Cory Clements signed on, Trish was often left to tend to the cattle alone. Plus, almost all their customers are either part-time cattle producers with smaller herds or retirees.

A three-year drought settled in about the same time the Stuedemanns bought their cattle, making strict culling even more of a necessity. So, they added cow age and time of calving to the list. When they acquired the cows, the herd was on a nine-month calving

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► **Above:** John Stuedemann strives for functional, balanced-trait cattle.

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season. Now, the 106-head cow herd starts its 90-day calving season in mid-September. This includes the calves from their artificial insemination (AI) program, as well as those sired by their clean-up bulls.

Road map for selection

In the meantime, their recordkeeping, both with the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program and Trish's own spreadsheets, is giving them a road map for selection. "We are fine-tuning now," John says. "With all our records, we are starting to see patterns."

One of those patterns is cow efficiency. "We always weigh our cows and calves at weaning and get a ratio of the cow's weight to the weaning weight of her calf," John notes. "I want a cow to wean at least 55%-60% of her body weight."

Fleshing ability is another trait the Stuedemanns prize.

They are also trying to tighten up the

weight range of their cattle. "We have quite a range of cow size, from 1,050 to 1,700 pounds," John says. "We'd like our cows to be in the 1,100- to 1,300-pound range."

He insists on capacity, though, no matter what the size. John, who conducts quite a bit of forage research in his day job, says, "Maybe that is my nutrition background showing."

He adds, "Good milking, good mothering ability and reproductive efficiency — the maternal traits are something we'll continue to emphasize." Growth rate is one thing he says they can improve upon.

"I don't know that I've set many absolutes," he adds. "If I see an EPD that is slightly less than breed average, I ask myself, in our situation, how bad is that really?"

Keeping it together

Even though other traits are higher on their list, they are by no means neglecting carcass traits. "We need a little more muscle, and our ribeye areas (REAs) are a little small," John says. "We haven't culled on the basis of carcass traits yet, but we do try to match the bulls to the cows in part because of carcass traits."

He emphasizes, though, "I think it is a mistake to pick a bull with an 18-inch (in.) ribeye. You need a balance."

Clements seconds that. "Carcass quality is great. Yearling weight is great. But if the cows don't work, if they aren't sound, working cows — they aren't any good."

USDA animal scientist Ronnie Green couldn't agree more. "The past several years, marbling has received increased attention in the marketplace, but you still need to pay attention to the greater package. Are they sound, functional cattle that fit your environment?"

"Cows that get too big have a much higher chance of losing their reproductive ability by getting out of synch with their environment," he explains. "That's the big-ticket item. You have to have a live calf that is going to grow to the best of its ability in your environment. If you don't have that, nothing else matters."

Green, who is USDA's national program leader for animal production research, continues, "You can overemphasize marbling. It is the old single-trait selection argument. If I was raising Angus cattle for the future, I would look at the mother cow's adaptability to her environment as well as the quality grade. Those have to be in one package."

Green says the American Angus Association is supplying breeders with the information they need to help breed that total package — the new dollar value (\$Value) indexes.

"Breeders have lots of tools at their fingertips if they will use them," he notes.

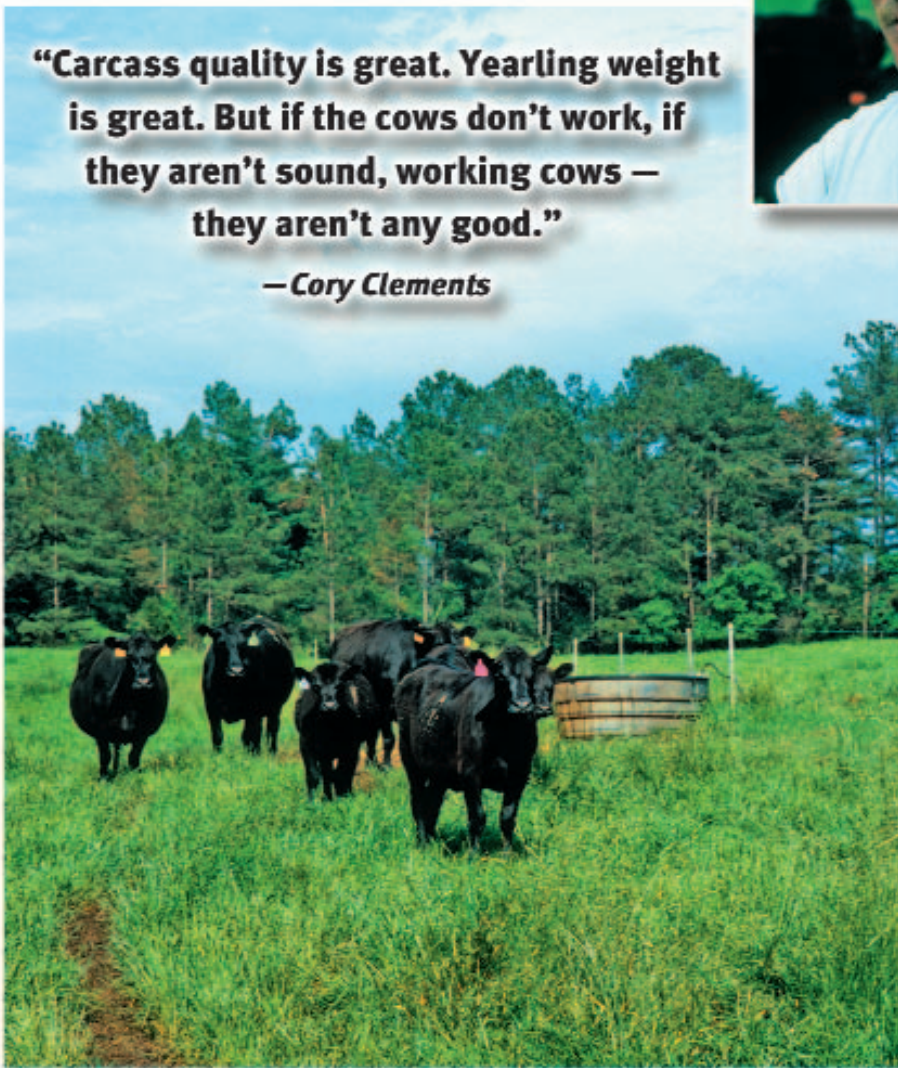
As for the Stuedemanns, they'll stick to balanced breeding. "Our niche is in the middle," Trish emphasizes.

► Farm manager and herdsman Cory Clements insists on sound cattle at Cold Spring Angus Farm.



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► Capacity is a must-have on Cold Spring Angus Farm.