

# Return to Agriculture

This young farmer chose to return to agriculture with Angus.

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**T**he average age of U.S. farmers is steadily rising. According to the USDA, the average age of farmers today is 57 years, and one-quarter of U.S. farmers are 65 or older. While our industry diversifies and more students take a less production-oriented role in agriculture, many people are left pondering where our industry will find its next generation.

The answer to that question comes in many forms. Education, experience and opportunity all play a role; however, the key component that most people forget when trying to interest young people in agriculture is simple: passion.

“There’s very few young cattle producers left in this area,” says fourth-generation farmer and first-generation Angus breeder

Blair Carney, owner of Blair Carney Farms, Adair, Iowa. “You go to the county cattlemen’s banquet or even to a sale barn, and the average age of those people is 60 plus. My dad’s young, let alone me!”

Spend a few hours with Blair and it becomes clear that this latest generation of agriculturalists may be few in number, but they have a passion for the industry.





### **New beginnings**

Blair graduated from Iowa State University (ISU) in 2008 with a degree in agriculture systems and technology and came back to the farm that his grandfather had founded. When his grandfather decided to retire, Blair received the opportunity to take over the homestead his grandparents had called home.

Blair saw the chance to take the operation in a new direction. It was ISU professor Doug Borkowski who sparked his interest in the Angus industry.

Soon after returning to the farm, Blair

had the opportunity to purchase a group of cows from a local cattleman who was intending to scale back his operation. The package deal, which included a tract of land, consisted of Angus females selected by the older producer. Those cattle would

become the base from which he has built his herd.

Fast-forward a few years and Blair Carney Farms now consists of 85 registered-Angus and 40 commercial cows. Blair utilizes some of the commercial animals as recipients for embryo transfer (ET), but he plans to slowly phase the commercial females out of his herd.



### **Management practices**

The family farm, now owned by Blair

CONTINUED ON PAGE 98



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**— Blair Carney**

## Return to Agriculture CONTINUED FROM PAGE 97

and his wife, Erin; his grandfather; father; and Blair's two brothers, continues to grow row crops, alfalfa and corn, as well as manage a commercial herd. Of the corn grown, 20%-25% goes back to Carney cattle as a custom mix Blair created with the help of a livestock nutritionist. Blair mentioned that last year, without the rain that much of the Midwest has been receiving recently, the long winter and expensive feedstuffs were cause for concern.

"We probably had another 15 or 20 days of feed left," Blair adds. "That was cutting it too close for me!"

Blair uses management practices that make the most of his resources.

"Rotational grazing is a must for my operation," says Blair. Practices such as splitting a 75-acre tract of land into three 25-acre pastures on a three- to five-day rotation allow him to better manage his herd. The recently acquired 75-acre tract was bought when Blair gave up another lease.

"Cattle producers simply can't compete with row-crop producers for rent," Blair states. "It's a money game."

In 2011, Blair Carney Farms ramped up its

### Using natural water sources

For many cattlemen, finding ways to better manage livestock and resources is of great importance. One high priority is discovering new ways to decrease costs and take advantage of resources available.

One way Blair Carney Farms has achieved this is through the use of tile lines to move water to troughs so cattle would have a constant flow of fresh, clean water.

Tile lines are a way to take excess water from a certain area and channel it to an area where it can be used. Blair Carney Farms used this method to supply spring-fed water to a trough. The water is channeled to the trough, comes up through the pipe and cycles through the trough back down to the tile line so that the water is constantly moving.

"This way our cattle always have fresh water without having to pump water to the trough," Carney says.



ET program using an ET facility that is located just 2 miles from the farm. The convenient location and technology used by the facility allows Carney to quickly multiply the genetics of the best females in his herd.

"It takes a while to get the wheel to turn with ET," Blair jokingly states. Having learned the basics of ET while at ISU, Blair catches cows during natural heat and transports them to the facility.

Using CIDR®, Blair synchronizes his females so that he can artificially inseminate (AI) and turn in Sydenstricker bulls for natural service 14 days later.

"I do some of my own AI work on natural heats," Blair says. Using this timed-breeding period, Blair ensures his heifers calve within the first few weeks of February and that every female will have calved by the end of March.

Creep-feeding is used to familiarize calves with feed, says Carney. "We creep-feed as a way to better prepare our calves for weaning."

Of the calves weaned each year, prospective bulls and replacement females are kept, while feeder calves are sold to a local feedyard. Select bulls are then consigned to the SydGen-Influence spring bull sale, while the rest sell private treaty. He sells 15-20 bulls per year in total. About 20 commercial heifers are sold locally by word of mouth.

"Docility is a huge X factor in the seedstock side of things for my operation," adds Blair, citing the average age of today's commercial cattleman as just one reason the farm culls for disposition.

### Continuing education

As a young Angus producer, Blair was looking for an opportunity to learn more about the Association and industry when regional manager Wes Tiemann steered him to the Association's 2012 Beef Leaders Institute (BLI). Having the opportunity to see the changes made at the Association during the last 30 years and having the chance to put a face with the names of the people making things happen behind the scenes at the Association were just a few of the things Blair felt were unique about BLI.

"It was unreal seeing the opposite side of the spectrum," Blair says, referring to another stop during BLI at Whole Foods, a supermarket catering to a different type of consumer. Whole Foods Market, a strictly natural and organic grocery store, charges a premium to consumers for locally sourced beef guaranteed to be humanely produced.

"Overall, BLI was a good experience for someone like myself, with few previous ties to the breed."



► Prospective bulls and replacement females are kept, while feeder calves are sold to a local feedyard.

Educational conferences are opportunities of which Blair takes full advantage. Extension specialists and tools help put a value on everything, plus offer tips and information on programs and research. "The tools Iowa State University has available today are second-to-none," Blair states.

### Planning for the future

"Financially, if you don't have a generation setting you up to ranch, it's nearly impossible," Blair says when listing the top challenges he faces as a first-generation Angus producer.

One thing that is surprising about Blair is that, even as a young producer, he is already concerned with estate planning.

"Estate planning is critical with the value of land and livestock today," says Blair, who lists communication as a crucial element to running the family farm. With 55% of the family farm's assets owned by his grandfather, 20% belonging to his father and the remainder split between Blair, his wife and two brothers who work away from the farm, there are quite a few people to keep informed.

"Everything is legally binding, so everyone knows where they stand," Blair adds. Wife Erin, a farmgirl whose family raised hogs and row crops, works for Farm Credit Services of America and is responsible for all of the farm finances and books.

At the end of the day, the changes that have been the most impactful from his grandfather's operation to his own is attention to detail.

"You have to pay attention to detail; sharpen your pencil every day," says Blair, who credits his work ethic to his own upbringing on the farm.

"I am very thankful for the opportunity to get in the Angus business," says Blair.

