



► **Left:** Monroe County extension agent Jonathan Rhea and retired county agent Bob Sliger select the bulls for the Regions Bank bull-leasing program.

As a result, the two men, along with Charlie Yount, an auctioneer of purebred cattle, wrote a proposal and presented it to George Butler, then-president of the Sweetwater Valley Bank. In the spring of 1973, three Angus bulls and two Polled Hereford bulls were leased to area cattle producers.

Now, besides record-breaking prices, Jonathan Rhea, the current Monroe County agent, says, “We have 0.03% Shorts at the feeder-calf sale.”

Although the increase in frame score is probably the most noticeable change, the bull-leasing program also gets high marks for boosting overall quality.

Now, Joe Houston’s son, Mark, and Mark’s wife, Jennifer, run the sale barn.

“No question about it,” Jennifer says. “The bank’s commitment to the bull-leasing program has improved the quality of the cattle in the valley. It has allowed farmers to have access to genetics they wouldn’t have otherwise.”

Although Sliger retired from the extension service in 2009, those genetics are still a passion, and he takes an active role in selecting the bulls with Rhea.

### Real-world application

Madisonville, Tenn., cattleman Dick Griffith is another long-time participant and supporter. He was the first producer to get an Angus bull, and although he is easing into semi-retirement and converting from a purebred to a commercial operation, he still has a leased bull. He also sold a number of bulls to the program.

“He and Bob made specific AI (artificial insemination) matings for specific herds,” says Rhea. He adds, “His performance-tested program made people believe in this program and the value of the leased genetics.”

Veteran Sweetwater cattleman Morgan Jones was also one of the early believers in the program. Now retired, his son and daughter, Michael Jones and Donna Cathcart, manage the 75-cow commercial operation.



► **Left:** Madisonville, Tenn., Angus breeder Dick Griffith leased the first Angus bull offered in the area’s bull-leasing program. Forty years later, he still has a leased Angus bull from the program.

# Bull Leasing Revisited

Tennessee bull-leasing program is 40 years old and still thriving.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**, field editor

**W**hen a bull-leasing program is still going 40 years after it was started, you can probably figure it is a success. When 700-pound (lb.) calves sired by the leased bulls bring \$1.60 per lb., you can bet on it.

Premium prices weren’t always the case. As a matter of fact, sizable deductions at the Smoky Mountain Feeder Calf sale in October 1972 were the main reason for the bull-leasing program (see July 2001 *Angus Journal*).

“We sold 2,400 head at the sale. Thirty five percent of them graded Short,” recalls Bob

Sliger, who was the Monroe County extension agent at the time. “The cattle were discounted 10¢ a pound. That was \$50 a calf. Everybody was mad. They wanted to shoot the graders and the county agent. It was a stressful time.”

That night, Sliger and Joe Houston, who has now passed away but was owner of East Tennessee Livestock Center, brainstormed while they waited for trucks to load the cattle.

“It has worked,” says Michael. “Bob Sliger says this is one of the better herds in Tennessee. The bull-leasing program is why. Dad started using it to get quality replacement heifers.”

Jones is also sold on the program because of the economics. “I would have to pay \$10,000 to \$12,000 for four bulls. The leases free up my capital for other farm investments.”

He and the other producers pay 20% of the bull’s purchase price per year of the lease, plus \$35 for administrative costs.

He also appreciates the time savings since he doesn’t have to do the bull shopping.

“Jonathan and Bob know the background on these bulls. They do the selection,” he explains. “Bob is so familiar with our program, he knows what kind of bulls we need to enhance it.”

While the producers are grateful for both the genetic quality and time and money savings of the program, it isn’t always a smooth or easy ride for those running it.

Obviously, bull prices have gone up. Sliger says a really good bull cost \$1,500 in the early 1970s. Now the average price of one of the 20 or so bulls in the program is \$3,000. However, one of the more dramatic changes has been with the bank that finances the program.

Says Sliger, “It has survived six name changes and four ownership changes.” The former small-town bank is now owned by Regions Bank.

Those changes involved an untold amount of time and work by Sliger, as well as Joe Houston, who was a bank director. They wrote letters, made phone calls and attended meetings to successfully convince each of the new owners to stick with the program.

Griffith says their success shows the program is handled correctly.

Rhea says, “We try to manage the program like the money is our own. It is sustainable. It

CONTINUED ON PAGE 196



► Morgan Jones used leased Angus bulls to build a herd of outstanding commercial cows.

## Angus — past, present and future

Retired Monroe County, Tenn., extension agent Bob Sliger has seen too many changes to name since 1973, when he purchased the first bulls for the area’s bull-leasing program. Expected progeny differences (EPDs), DNA testing and embryo transfer (ET) were still in the talking stages for most in the industry. As far as downloading a breed’s sire summary on a smartphone, the very idea was pretty much in the science-fiction category.

However, there has been one constant. Angus is still the breed of choice.

“The people who set the direction and policy of Angus cattle the last 30 to 40 years have done a marvelous job,” Sliger states. “The Angus breed is built on facts.”

“Probably 99% of our bulls are Angus,” says Jonathan Rhea, current county agent. “There [are] a lot of data in Angus cattle, and they are predictable.”

When Rhea and Sliger go to a farm or sale to select bulls, they make use of those data. While they generally have a particular operation in mind for each bull, they still look at the big picture.

“Over the years we’ve tried to select for balance,” says Sliger.

Rhea says, “We look at frame, disposition, carcass traits, milk, growth, the whole EPD spectrum.”

Since most of the producers who lease the bulls market through the Smoky Mountain Feeder Calf sales, where calves are graded and sorted into uniform lots, the two selectors keep marketability at the top of their list — but the breed takes care of that.

“There is a demand for Angus,” says Sliger.

Rhea agrees. “If you come to our feeder-calf sale, you’ll see. This is a marketing program, not a bull-leasing program. Our purpose is to help the producers. Angus bulls help us make uniformity in our feeder-calf sales and the other breeds just don’t fit.”

► **Below:** The leased bulls provide program participants an economical way to add superior genetics to their herds.



► Dick Griffith’s top-quality heifers represent decades of careful genetic selection.

## Bull Leasing Revisited

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 195

has actually made money for Regions Bank.”

For his part, Rhea says others interested in starting a bull-leasing program should be prepared. “You’ve got to use common sense and sound judgment. If you think it will come up, it will.”

He adds, “Bob and Dick made the program work with a lot of 11 p.m. nights and 100° days.”

The county agent also gives a great deal of credit to the Houstons and East Tennessee Livestock Center. “Mark has stored bulls for us, and we use his pens and chute.”

“Mark says the gate is always open to us,” Sliger adds.

Sliger also says the producers have done and continue to do their part. “You have to have producers who want to improve and are willing to think a little out of the box.”

When he talks about the changes from the nondescript 400-lb. mountain calves sold in the 1970s to the 700-lb. top-quality feeder calves coming out of the Sweetwater Valley now, Sliger says it is all worth it. “What it did is off the scale. It is tremendous.”



**Editor’s Note:** *Becky Mills is a freelancer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, Ga.*

## Make bull leasing a healthy option

Although University of Georgia veterinarian Lee Jones thinks bull leasing can be a great tool for producers, he says, “Cover your biosecurity risks.”

When it comes to either virgin bulls or those that have been used in another operation, he recommends a complete vaccination program.

“Bulls definitely need to have an annual booster for the viruses BVD (bovine viral diarrhea) I, BVD II and IBR (infectious bovine rhinotracheitis), and you might as well include BRSV (bovine respiratory syncytial virus).” He also says vaccinations against campylobacter (vibrio) and leptospirosis (lepto) are a must, and the lepto vaccine should be one that stimulates immunity against *Lepto hardjo bovis*.

He adds, “I like it when bulls have a series of modified-live virus (MLV) vaccines done while they are still young. Then they can just be boosted annually with a killed product.”

For bulls that have been used on another operation, Lee recommends testing for trichomoniasis (trich) and vibrio.

However, Jonathan Rhea, Monroe County, Tenn., extension agent, says, “Our state extension vet says trich shouldn’t be a major concern at this time in Tennessee.”

Whether they are virgin bulls or bulls that have been used before, Lee says a preseason breeding soundness exam (sometimes referred to as a BSE), including a semen check, is a necessity.

The producers in the Sweetwater Valley area, including those who participate in the bull-leasing program, don’t have to worry about having bull-proof working facilities for the health work. Rhea says, “In January we organize a day at the stockyards for BSE. We strongly encourage producers to bring their leased bulls.”

For \$45 per bull, the vet does a complete BSE. For an additional charge, he will also vaccinate and deworm while he has the bull in the chute.

► Monroe County extension agent Jonathan Rhea spends untold hours managing the area’s bull-leasing program.

