

Arartificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET) may level the genetic playing field for smaller breeders, but that still leaves the challenge of marketing small numbers of bulls. In southwest Iowa, a group of Angus breeders bulldozed that hurdle by forming their own bull test and sale.

The breeders created the Elite Angus Genetic Alliance (EAGA) and are having their bulls fed and tested at a central location near Oakland, Iowa. After the 112-day test, the bulls are sold at the nearby Dunlap auction barn.

“We’re attempting to do the same things the large breeders do, but we can’t do them individually,” explains Audubon, Iowa, producer Ed Wiederstein.

“None of the individual breeders had a facility to do it on their own,” says Bud Beedle, who runs the test with his son, Perry.

Discussion about the bull test started in 2001 with the Botna Valley Angus Association. “The next year we had the same interest, plus more,” says Neal Smith, a Walnut, Iowa, breeder. “We decided to go with it.”

The breeders were shooting for 50 bulls, but when the Beedles agreed to do the test they ended up with 96 head.

Getting started

Bud is the longtime county Extension agent for Pottawattamie County and is heavily involved with the well-known Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF), a group of feeders who feed cattle and collect data for producers across the country. Perry worked for the Tri-County group and is now employed by one of the TCSCF participating feedlots.

Darrell Busby, Iowa State University (ISU) Extension livestock field specialist, another TCSCF leader, also mentors the Angus breeders.

“Our association with Tri-County is really positive,” Smith says. “Their credibility is top-notch.”

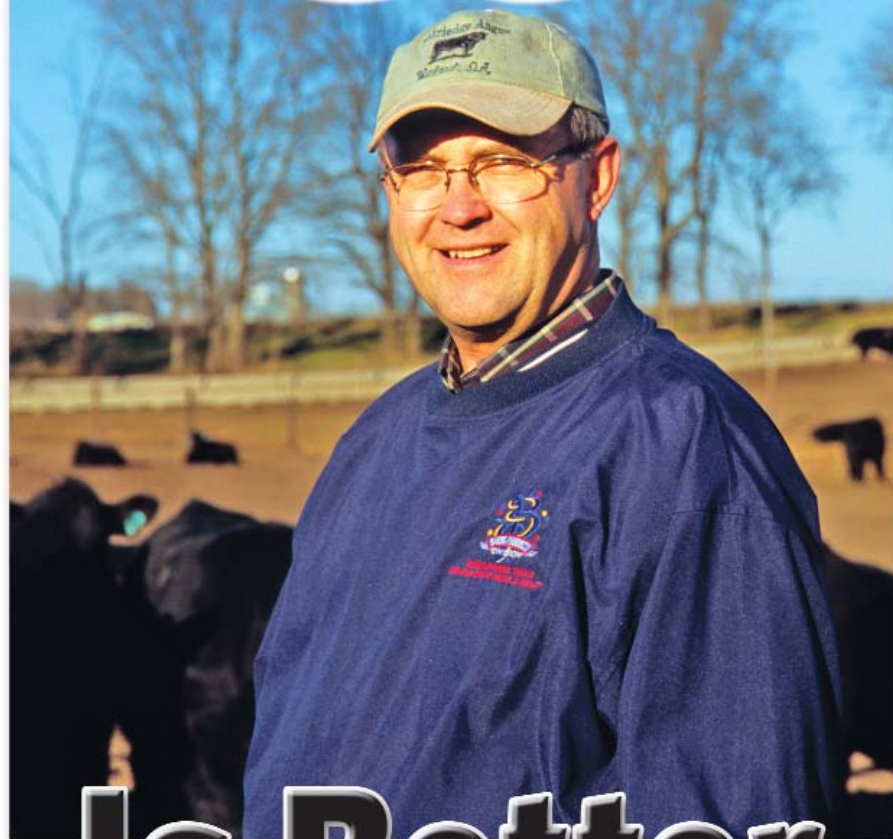
Beedle says TCSCF also works with the breeders on recordkeeping and feed rations and costs.

The feeding know-how is a big plus. “With the bull tests that feed for maximum gains, the bulls come out with a little less structural soundness,” Beedle says. “Here, we feed a ration that is hot enough the bulls will express differences in gain. They do have more longevity in the pasture and don’t melt down when they are turned out with the cows.”

“We sold it as a development facility for

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Bigger



Is Better for Bull Marketing

Iowa group cooperates to bring in buyers.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

► **Above:** The Elite Angus Genetic Alliance is made up of breeders like Neal Smith who work with other breeders to test their young bulls at a central location.

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small breeders,” Smith adds, “and a way to get data within our herds. Some of the consignors brought almost their whole bull calf crops.”

At the end of the test, the consignors decide which bulls to sell. As an aid, they use a ratio developed by ISU animal scientist Daryl Strohhahn. The ratio is weighted 30% for average daily gain (ADG) and 20% for weight per day of age (WDA), making gain responsible for 50% of the index. The ultrasound performed on the last weigh day accounts for 30% of the ratio — 15% each for intramuscular fat (IMF) and percent retail product (%RP). In addition, 10% is based on the birth weight expected progeny difference (BW EPD) of the bull and 10% on his milk EPD.

After their initial processing, each bull also receives a disposition score every time he goes through the chute. The average is published in the sale book.

“We tried to minimize the idea that here is the top-gaining bull, or that the top-gaining bull is the best bull,” Smith says. “This ratio gave us attractive bulls throughout the sale and kept it strong until the end. The third from the last bull to sell brought well above the sale average of \$1,710.”

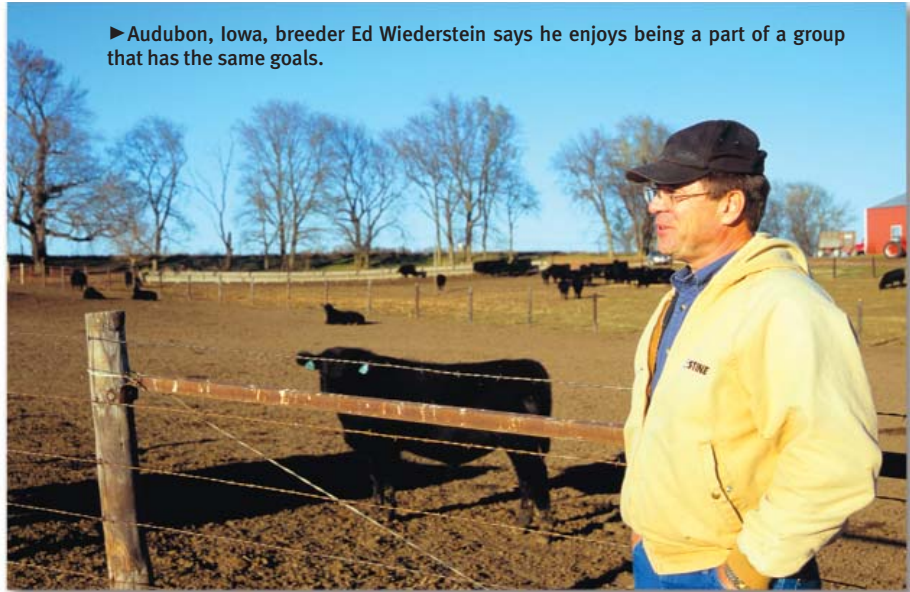
Marketing advantages

Although the consignors did suffer from first-time jitters, they were pleased with the sale. “We had more buyers than bulls,” Smith says. “We



► **Above:** Bud Beedle strives to feed bulls at the central test a ration that will show their genetic differences, but not one that will get them too fat.

► **Right:** The feedlot of Bud and Perry Beedle, near Oakland, Iowa, serves as a central test for a group of like-minded Angus breeders.



► Audubon, Iowa, breeder Ed Wiederstein says he enjoys being a part of a group that has the same goals.

felt really good about that and were pleased for the first time out for an Angus bull sale in western Iowa.”

“The bull test is a great marketing tool,” Wiederstein agrees.

“Obviously, at a central bull test, buyers have a larger number of bulls to select from right in front of them,” says University of Georgia animal scientist Johnny Rossi. “That is a big advantage when you’re selling bulls. If you just have four bulls, you may not get a lot of buyers to come look at them.”

The Iowa consignors helped themselves before the sale with a smart mix of marketing and education. They hosted an educational meeting for cow-calf producers and potential buyers at ISU’s Armstrong Extension Center in Lewis. Strohhahn spoke

on selection and management of yearling bulls, then the breeders took the group to the bull test to see the bulls. In addition, they gave each of the attendees a \$25 credit toward the purchase of a sale bull.

“It was well-received,” Smith comments. “We’re going to do it again.”

They are also putting their first year’s experience to work making the 2004-2005 test and sale even better. “I’m not 100% sold on the ratio we’re using,” Smith says. “I think we will tweak it a little this year. It is hard to come up with one size fits all.”

The end of the test and sale logistics are other areas in which they’ll make changes. On the last test day, the bulls were run through the chute and weighed, then run

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back through for their ultrasounds. A week later, they went through the chute again for the breeding soundness exam. A few days later, a fitter came to the bull test and trimmed them. Then they were moved to the sale barn and washed on the Saturday and Sunday before the Monday sale.

"That was too short a time," Smith says. "It wrings the bulls out. We started the test two weeks earlier this time."

Smith also says there were two pens of young bulls that didn't do as well dollarwise in the sale. This year, the late March and April bulls will be sold in their own sale in June, the Turn Out sale, rather than selling in March with the older bulls.

Satisfaction is desired

So far, the things that are going right far outweigh those that don't. First, the group has been able to hold down costs. For the first test, they were asked to make a \$70 deposit. Fifty dollars went toward feed costs, which are handled with a loan from a local bank, then deducted from the sale price of the bull. Twenty dollars went to the alliance

for postage costs and office supplies, which go partly toward a consignor newsletter. This year only \$10 is allocated to the alliance and \$60 was deposited in the feed account.

It appears the buyers are satisfied. Angus breeder Duane Warden bought a bull in the first sale to use in his own herd. "They are doing a good job with their bull test. I'm starting to get concerned with some of these bull tests where they feed the bulls for gains of 5 pounds a day. They get too fat.

"I was looking for a bull of his breeding, and he had excellent gain, excellent ultrasound and a good scrotal circumference," says the Council Bluffs, Iowa, cattleman of the bull he purchased. "I bred him to 14 heifers last spring, and I plan on using him more this year."

Smith says, "We want the producers to be as happy with the bulls after the breeding season as they were when they wrote the checks. So far, that's what they are telling us."

At this point, the outlook is optimistic for the long term for the EAGA and the test. Eight consignors delivered 101 bulls for the 2005 sales.

"That's what impresses me about this group," Beedle says. "A lot of groups may have a good idea but in the second year it falls apart. From the very beginning they always understood it is a long-range commitment — at least five years. If they run into a problem, they sit down together and tackle it head-on and work it out."

"There is some competition between members, but not fierce competition," Smith adds. "There is camaraderie. We try to think of the bull test as a single entity."

Toward that goal, the members are working to make the bulls more uniform. "One of our market goals is to have more half-brother bulls," he explains. "To accommodate that, we are trying to use more of the same AI sires and use each other's clean-up bulls. But that will take time."

"It is great this group of breeders feel the same way," Wiederstein says. "There is still just as much enthusiasm in the second year as the first year. It is exciting to be a part of a group like that."



