



# Family, Cattle and Business

Indiana family measures, monitors and makes improvements.

Story & photos by **Katie Fisher**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**T**he business advantages of switching to higher-percentage Angus cows add up for the Oakalla Valley Partnership of Greencastle, Ind. That's where Ron and Jane Alcorn, along with sons Jay and Kyle, manage 250 fall- and spring-calving cows in pastures spread across their 4,000 rolling acres that are mainly dedicated to grain farming.

When the family put the herd together 25 years ago, they followed a three-breed rotation using Angus, Simmental and Gelbvieh bulls, along with artificial insemination (AI) on heifers. Ten years later they began retaining ownership of calves when Purdue University's IBEEF started working through the network of Iowa feedlots in the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF).

The eye-opening experience spurred action.

"I immediately sold two bulls once I got the information back," Ron Alcorn says of that first group of calves on test.

He resolved to keep sending calves there to keep learning, culling and selecting bulls accordingly.

"You get complete performance and carcass information on each calf, and you



► Ron and Jane Alcorn farm with sons Jay (left) and Kyle (right), managing 250 spring- and fall-calving cows near Greencastle, Ind.

can see your averages vs. that of the other people feeding," Ron explains. "It's like a benchmarking thing."

The family kept track of data as they changed genetics. In the fall of 2000, 49

spring-born steers made 65.3% Yield Grade (YG) 1-2, with 53.1% Choice or better. Just four of them qualified for the Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand. Fed for 180 days, the average age at sale was 445 days.

## Making a difference

Ten years later, after switching to primarily Angus genetics, Oakalla Valley's 75 spring-born steers in IBEEF made 46.7% YG 1-2, but Choice or better had increased to 78.7%. Fed for 173 days, their age at harvest was reduced to 401 days.

Since the IBEEF calves are fed in Iowa, the family became acquainted with David Trowbridge, manager of Gregory Feedlot, Tabor, Iowa. They began sending two or three loads a year, starting in 2005. The last couple of years those cattle have been qualifying for the brand at up to 50% CAB.

"He always brings us high-performance cattle with good carcass numbers," Trowbridge says. "They're great people, and they produce great cattle."

With higher-quality calves getting to harvest six weeks earlier, Jay Alcorn says, "This has allowed us to move our calving season a little later and still market calves at the same time or even slightly earlier."

They gave up a little carcass weight, but made up for that in quality premiums and easier-keeping cows. "We have been able to improve and moderate the mature frame size of our cows," he adds.

In the early years, when trying to maximize heterosis, Ron says, "We had trouble getting the consistency and the uniformity in the calves that we needed. They were more terminal cattle rather than being able to keep in a group of replacement heifers."

Today, all heifers are bred to balanced, calving-ease Angus bulls regardless of their sire. In the cow herd, those sired by an Angus bull are bred to Simm-Angus and vice-versa.

"Everything is at least three-quarter Angus or better," Ron says. "It has worked out well for us."

When it comes to AI, "We aren't considering anything that's not one of the more elite Angus bulls. The end goal is putting a better steak on the table, so that's what we select for," Jay says. The breeding period at the farm is 45 days for both spring and fall, with the option to switch herds one time.

## Strict culling criteria

"Cattle here only get two chances; if you



► Spring calves are weaned at the end of August, kept at the farm for 45-60 days with two more rounds of shots before they are shipped.

don't make it, you don't make it, you are sold. We stick to a strict breeding season," Ron says, noting a 15% culling rate. "We don't have time to keep around a lot of problems — poor udders, feet or attitudes. If these issues occur, they are gone."

Their crop farming demands equally narrow calving seasons.

"We will bring all our spring calvers in during late winter, into one spot where we are going to calve them out," Ron says. "So, we aren't running around trying to manage different locations." It's much the same with fall calvers in late summer.

Each cow goes through a chute twice a year; vaccinated and fly-tagged in the spring and preg-checked in season. The calves are vaccinated as babies and at spring turnout.

Spring calves are weaned at the end of August, kept at the farm for 45-60 days with two more rounds of shots before they are shipped. Fall calves are weaned every spring and go out on grass in the summer, and those are the calves most likely to go to Gregory Feedlot for finishing.

Today, the Alcorns use more rotational grazing, splitting pastures and rotating the cows through. They are spraying pastures for the invasive ironweed, and soil testing to add

nutrients that will improve forage quality. New spring developments and a solar waterer are the fruits of steady innovation to put more emphasis on their own pastures instead of renting extra ground.

That's another aspect that brings satisfaction for a family doing what they love.

"I think one thing unique about our farm is our willingness to make changes. If we see something that could be better, we aren't 'stuck in the mud' or afraid to change," Ron says.

Looking forward, he notes the addition of son Kyle to the business, the latest and most recent in the family of Purdue graduates.

"I hope we continue to make improvements where we need them and grow a little bit as we go. As pastures get better, I hope to increase our cow numbers just a little," he adds.

Upgrading facilities, fixing fence and continuing to improve herd genetics will always be on the "to-do list," and Jay says, "We will grow as we need to, to support three families."

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**Editor's Note:** Katie Fisher is an industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.