



► Lyle “Butch” Billips, Hill City, Kan., has worked for 20 years to produce high-quality cattle. They have averaged an extra \$42 to \$90 in quality premiums.

PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

“With it, we are using bulls we couldn’t even dream of buying,” Billips says.

At first, he only used AI on heifers, but after seeing the quick genetic advancements, cows had to have it, too.

“That way, we could more easily see how individual animals were performing and what changes needed to be made,” he says. “We started culling to create a more uniform, moderately framed cow herd.”

The development of heat synchronization was a huge factor in extending that technology to the whole herd.

“Not only can we AI a lot more cows,” Billips says, “but we can do it with less labor and better results.” With timed AI, their breeding success rate is greater than 60%, and that could improve with the next step: building better breeding facilities in each pasture.

# Satisfaction

Developing a high-quality commercial Angus herd pays off from ranch to consumer.

by Lyndee Stabel

**M**any people set high goals, but few actually put in the work to reach them. Lyle “Butch” Billips, Hill City, Kan., is one of those few.

When he started the herd with his brother, Ace, the main objective was simply to raise the best-quality cattle possible. More than 20 years later, Billips can point to convincing evidence that they hit that mark every year.

In 2010, after keeping the best females as replacements, 71% of the remaining 400 calves met *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand and CAB Prime specifications. Results in 2011 were even better, with 83% achieving CAB and Prime.

Producers know the cattle they raise will end up on

consumers’ plates, but Billips understands that better than most. He keeps it in mind from breeding to feeding and finishing, even to direct marketing some beef through his own beef fabrication and aging facility.

The commercial Angus herd has grown steadily to 650 cows and 135 heifers as artificial insemination (AI) breeding technology and heifer development strategies have advanced. AI has been a major key.



► **Right:** As genetics have improved, the Billips cattle have become increasingly efficient, even eating 5 lb. less per day than they did 10 years ago on a fattening ration. Only 85-90 days are needed on full feed to reach harvest weight.

## Professional development

Replacement heifers are no longer bred on the farm. Starting in 1995, Billips has sent them to the Heartland Cattle Co. heifer development and research center at McCook, Neb., where each one is tested and “evaluated nine ways from Sunday,” he says. Any potential structural or disposition problems are brought to his attention, so only the best animals are kept and bred.

“When I get my heifers back, I know that every one will be in perfect condition, and every one will be bred to the AI sire of my choosing,” Billips says. No longer does he worry about using unproven clean-up bulls for the heifers. Now he’s sure every new set of replacements is improving genetics in the herd.

Information technology from expected progeny differences (EPDs) to ultrasound and DNA-marker tests are brought to bear at Heartland.

“These tools ensure proper selection and breeding of replacement heifers,” says owner-manager Patsy Houghton.

They can make a big difference in how finished progeny perform on the rail, too, she adds. As for the Billips heifers, Houghton says, “They are efficient, easy to handle and consistently beat the yard average for fertility.”

## Attentions at home

Without having to make room for heifers at the ranch, Billips has been able to increase cow numbers, and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 70

## **Satisfaction** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 68

steadily improving data provided the incentive. He gets the most from good health and genetics because those calves are fed at home under Ace's management. That's taking "retained ownership" to a higher level.

Since the mid-1990s, the Billips brothers have fattened their own cattle.

"We couldn't see any sense in bringing them to 800 pounds (lb.) and then turning them over to someone else," Billips says. "Instead, we can bring them to 1,200 lb. and

take full advantage of their conversion rates, genetics and health."

The cattle are then marketed through the GeneNet Marketing Alliance, which returns all carcass data so they can see where the herd can still improve.

Fellow producers can be a great resource for information and knowledge, too.

Observing success and talking to others, Billips pushed calving dates forward by 45 days.

"We were concerned that it would be hard

to get the cattle finished quickly enough to capitalize on the younger age," but everything worked out, he says.

As genetics have improved, the Billips cattle have become increasingly efficient, even eating 5 lb. less per day than they did 10 years ago on a fattening ration. Only 85-90 days are needed on full feed to reach harvest weight.

"We're able to sell these calves at virtually the same time of year, even though they are 40 days younger," Billips says. Not only have winter feed costs decreased dramatically, but

so have labor requirements. "It is a lot easier to calve at the end of March than in mid-February," he says. Working in nicer weather and longer days even improves attitudes on the ranch, he adds.

### **Quality pays**

Billips says he has no doubt that producing quality cattle pays off in premiums and efficiencies. Last year, nearly every calf earned extra quality premiums, averaging \$42 to \$90 per head. Building a high-quality herd may cost a bit, he admits.

"But the cheapest cow you'll ever buy will probably be the one you pay the most money

for if the quality is there," he says. "I've never yet regretted one of those purchases, but I have paid for cheap cattle that I wished I'd never bought."

As input prices continue to increase, he says he figures the quality and efficiency will only become more important.

"There are so many fixed costs you can't do anything about," he says. "So you might as well get the best quality and premium for the product you sell."

Constantly improving and fine-tuning at the top of the game keeps up morale and a certain excitement for the work. Years ago, some of that satisfaction was in following

the data to find culls, those cows that could not produce calves to measure up, but that phase is over now.

"We don't really have a bottom end anymore, just a top end," Billips says. "Every calf is virtually the same."

There may be no greater sense of satisfaction, he admits. "The point we're at now is where we dreamed of being some day. We have arrived."

If there is a victory lap, don't expect to see Billips slow down.



**Editor's Note:** *Lyndee Stabel is a freelance writer for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*