



Dealing Dollars from Data

Making connections across industry segments means profit for farmer, feeder and breeder.

Story & photo by *Laura Nelson*

Like many of his peers in the South, Larry Skeets loved Brahman cattle.

He started in the cattle business 20 years ago with a registered herd, some show stock and commercial crossbreds. But by the late 1990s, he knew it just wasn't going to work.

"We had never been interested in Angus cattle," Skeets recalls. "You know, I just couldn't get over those Brahmans — but the market was dictating against them. They didn't want to buy them in Nebraska, and they sure didn't want to feed them in Kansas. You couldn't sell them anywhere."

Fed up with a market that wouldn't pay top dollar for cattle with "ear," he started looking for a change. The Branch, Ark., cattleman was forced to take action in 1999 when a couple of bulls died near the start of breeding season. An ad for Ratcliff Ranch, Vinita, Okla., caught his eye.

Dealing

"I called Billy Hall up and told him I needed three bulls. He told me they were having a sale in two weeks. I said, 'No, you're not hearing me. I said I need three bulls and I'm talking today.'"

Hall, the ranch manager at Ratcliff, chuckles over the same story now. "He was sure enough needing some bulls, but I was busy and wouldn't sell them before the sale," he says. "So I loaned him three instead."

That was on a promise that Skeets would return to the sale and make a purchase. Sure enough, the Arkansas cattleman came back for the sale, looking for more. He bought a full load of Angus heifers and a couple of bulls from the ranch and never looked back.

Skeets returned home to take another look at his herd, intending to cull with the most stringent of standards.

"My son was trying to sort the good

crossbred cows from the bad ones. I told him, 'I know how we'll do that. You get them all in the corrals and I'll get the trucks.' We sold everything right then," Skeets says. "When we decided that's what we were going to do, we didn't buy another cow that wasn't Angus."

Little more than a decade later, Skeets and son Mac are more sure than ever that they made the right decision. They developed a herd of 200 cows, some registered Angus and some commercial, and most spawned from Ratcliff genetics. In his relationship with Hall, Skeets also finally found the market he was missing in the Brahman business.

The two swap cattle between Arkansas and Oklahoma, finding mutually beneficial deals in all phases of production. Hall buys all his calves, knowing the genetic potential of the bull battery he

sold. Skeets buys all fresh replacement heifers, relying on Hall's knowledge of progeny data to build on the genetic excellence of his cow herd.

Fit to feed

Skeets doesn't have troubling getting northern feeders to notice his cattle anymore, either. Last year, Hall started partnering on them with the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Chappell Feedlot. They've had nothing but good news.

"Larry's got uncanny timing — every time the market is poppin,' he's selling me something," Hall says in his joking manner. "And I'm just the biggest sucker for loving to buy his cattle."

It's no wonder, really. The calves that went to the Chappell, Neb., feedlot this spring were gaining 4.42 pounds (lb.) per day and converting at 4.8 lb. of feed per pound of gain at the midpoint. Ultrasound scans projected 96% grading USDA Choice, and Hall figures at least 50% will meet *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand standards. Historical data backs that up, as a previous Skeets-origin pen averaged 40% CAB acceptance. Those spring-born calves entered the yard at 658 lb. and gained an average 4.52 lb. per day.

"They are among the very top we feed. They come in a little lighter than most — usually around 650 or 700, but they gain like 8- or 9-weights," Tom Williams, Chappell manager, says. "The grading on those calves is just fabulous."

That's not all.

"These cattle have above-average ribeyes for the breed and they're still clicking off

► **Above:** Fed up with a market that wouldn't pay top dollar for cattle with "ear," Larry Skeets started looking for a change. He found a solution with Angus cattle.

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40%, well above average, CAB acceptance. That's something I keep hammering on these purebred guys — get some ribeyes on these things," Williams says. "With that kind of performance, there's just nothing missing."

Keeping their cool

Although Skeets doesn't retain ownership on feed, he shares an interest in those reports from the yard. They prove his program is paying off, and because of the continuous trading in calves and replacements, he knows that performance will come back to his Arkansas herd in the end.

"I don't ever want to send Billy or Tom anything I wouldn't want them to send right back to me," Skeets says. That's why he keeps a focus on disposition, low-stress handling and preventive health, in addition to those carcass results. He knows it all ties together.

"When my calves get off the truck up there at Chappell, they need to go straight to the feedbunk and wait on Tom to bring the feed," Skeets says. "There's no room in a feedlot for calves that are so high-strung that they're always watching what the rider or the feedtrucks are doing."

Calm cattle come from careful selection in the cow herd. "I don't have room for a cow that's gone silly, either," he says. "I've been run over too many times by hot-headed old cows. If they're not darn-near lovable, they're getting culled." That disposition proves its worth when weaning season comes around.

"There's no way to avoid a little stress when we wean, but when the cows are calm the calves are calm," he says. At calving, and again at weaning, he makes use of a 40-acre trap where he can keep a watchful eye on the herd. Weaning just means moving the cows out of the trap for continued fence-line contact; two days is all it takes for the separation stress to wear off. Calves get two rounds of vaccinations and spend 60 to 90 days prepping for the next phase.

Retained management

Williams and Hall get a lot more than high-quality, healthy, hungry calves when they arrive in Chappell, too. They get a stack of data Skeets has carefully tracked, linking performance records with genetic lineage.

The combination of expected progeny differences (EPDs) from the Ratcliff bulls, feedlot data from Chappell, carcass data from the packer and herd information from Skeets make decision-making a little easier. Skeets takes his Process Verified Program

(PVP) seriously, matching AngusSource® tags to ranch tags that link each calf back to the cow.

He keeps two meticulous notebooks — one that prioritizes cows, the other focusing on calves. Each cow has a historic listing of her calving record, including calf sex, date born, ear tag numbers, and registration number or origin. The latter book puts calves in numerical AngusSource tag sequence with their date of birth, weights, vaccinations and health records.

The past four years, Skeets has retained management of his calves after Hall purchases them, allowing one more set of data for his records. At purchase time, Skeets weighs, sorts and turns the calves back onto the lush Arkansas grass for another 60 to 90 days. Hall leases the grass from him, allowing the cattle to grow on their home turf, which is fertilized with chicken litter from Skeets' poultry-growing operation.

When the calves are ready to be sent to the feedlot, their records go with them. The crew at Chappell never has a surprise when the cattle show up.

"He really does care about what happens when they leave his place — that's important to us," Williams says. "He gets those calves weaned and off to a great start for us, and boy, does the quality show."

Data knack

When the harvest data comes back, it goes to Hall for analysis with Skeets.

“He is certainly one of our more analytical bull customers,” Hall says. “We have to look at the kill data that comes back from Tom; then we know what bulls to send to Larry’s the next time around.”

When they analyze their genetic needs, it has to go beyond the carcass. “Moderate” is a term that comes up a lot — everyone knows single-trait extremes won’t do. The men want moderate birth weights and frames, but calves that will grow quickly, too.

Calculating numbers and analyzing data might not sound like the quickest way to profit, but Skeets and Hall know it is the best way to manage financial risk and long-term success. Skeets prefers to take the risk out of replacement heifers by buying them from the Ratcliff Ranch.

“Sometimes keeping replacement heifers is like playing Russian roulette,” he says.

“They’re expensive to keep, and then what do you do if one comes up open? You’re stuck with selling a barren heifer for salebarn prices. I’d much rather go to Billy and buy a heifer that I know has a calf with her — then I know I’ll at least break even on the deal.”

The cattle have integrity at every step.

“We have to use proven bulls and well-

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— Tom Williams

rounded cattle,” Hall says. “We’re the ones buying them all back. If we sell a bunch of cattle with mistakes in them, we’re ultimately the ones responsible, and we’ll pay for it in the long run. I have to know what the cattle do, how they perform and what we’re getting into.”

In Skeets’ case, the analytical knack comes from a former, non-farm career. He left his dad’s dairy farm as a young man and spent the better part of two decades in Tulsa, Okla. He and wife Linda worked in the same building, she as a stockbroker on the 20th floor, he as a data processor on the 12th. They worked hard in the city, hardly saw one

another and drove separate cars to work. Like the instinct that would lead him to liquidating his herd and starting from scratch in the Angus business a decade later, Skeets just knew it wasn’t right.

“I finally had to call home and say, ‘Dad, Linda and I both quit our jobs, and we’re coming home.’” Skeets thought his dad would be angry, and had put this conversation off. “Instead, he said ‘Well, where the hell have you been, son? I’ve been waiting on this phone call.’ It was just wonderful to hear him say that.”

His own son, Mac, also went off to school, married and spent time working a “city job.” “I thought he’d never come back — thought he’d had enough of tractors and cows,” Larry says. But, like his dad, Mac chose to come back and now has two young boys of his own on the ranch.

From dairy to data processing, from Brahman to Angus, Skeets has seen a lot of changes on his Branch, Ark., farm. But as long as there’s enough data and business sense to keep moving forward, that’s OK.

“I’ve seen cattle get better and better over the years, and that’s one thing I’d like to do forever,” he says. “I’d like to see every set of cattle that comes through here improve over the last one.”

