

Luck ^{o'} the Irish

Fortune smiles on 20-year road to the 2004 NACC steer division championship.

Story & photos by Lance Zimmerman

Carcass contests always require a little luck to finish out on top. Producers can do everything right when it comes to quality genetics, sound management and effective technology. Yet, wild cards like weather and disease suggest winners need a little luck, too.

When pedigrees trace back to some of the first registered Angus, and cow families are built like dynasties, could it just be luck? Regardless, Bill and Yvonne Woods' Irish-origin Angus cattle overcame the odds to win a "pot of gold" in the 2004 National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC). The 43-head entry won grand champion steer honors, earning the cattle fame and \$3,000 in prize money.

The Woods family owns Woodstone Angus, which consists of 500 registered Angus cows. Operated in New Ulm, Texas, by Bill, Yvonne and son Will, and in Hackett, Ark., by cattle managers John and Angela Wiggins, the ranch has been oriented toward Irish Angus cattle for 25 years.

Throughout the 1970s, as Continental cattle breeds gained popularity, the industry was moving to "taller, more gigantic-sized cattle," Bill says. Searching for alternatives, in



► Woodstone Angus claimed the \$3,000 reward for winning champion steer pen in the 2004 NACC while in Denver, Colo., at the National Western Stock Show. Shown are (from left) Jim Shirley, American Angus Association; Kathy LaScala, *Drovers*; Jim Riemann, CAB; Bill Woods and John Wiggins, Woodstone; Dale Moore, Cattleman's Choice Feedyard; and Mark Armentrout, John Deere FoodOrigins.

1980 the family met a like-minded cattle breeder and Angus specialist from Magnolia, Texas.

"We were unhappy with the way things were going in the industry at that time," Bill says. "Al Mauer had been to Scotland a few times and recommended we go there to get back to the old bloodlines of the original Angus cattle."

The Woodstone Angus breeding philosophy was born during that encounter.

As the industry standard for carcass weights grew larger, Bill and Yvonne continued to rely on tradition, tapping into the early traits of Angus cattle.

The result is a time-tested herd of Irish-influenced Angus cattle that offer calving ease, mothering ability and easy maintenance on grass, while raising calves that consistently grade Choice or better. These traits parallel with today's industry goals. However, achieving this standard in the 1980s wasn't easy.

"We looked all over Scotland and were unable to find any pure pedigreed

animals because they had been using Canadian bulls," Bill explains. "Al called another acquaintance in Ireland, and that is where the base of the herd came from."

Mauer and the Woods family traveled to Ireland, visiting small cow herds that "the typical rancher wouldn't give a second thought to." However, out of these 40- to 80-acre operations came the foundation for the Woodstone herd — three distinct strains of bulls and nine heifers from pure Irish Angus cows.

The herd has grown to current numbers through linebreeding and the occasional outcross to proven American sires. The older lines of American Angus provide the herd with a little more carcass weight and size, but Irish bloodlines still make up at least 50% of the genetics in each animal.

"I prefer the proven stuff. I want consistency," Bill adds. "All of my breeding has been from my own herd. They are heavily linebred. Every cow and daughter looks the same, and I know what lines they are from."

Learning from the past

Recordkeeping has been a key to Bill's success. Using a copy of old Scottish



► Woodstone Angus won the champion steer pen in the 2004 NACC. Shown are (from left) Angela, Charli and John Wiggins with Yvonne, Will and Bill Woods. Owners Bill and Yvonne oversee the herd at New Ulm, Texas, while managers John and Angela operate the herd at Hackett, Ark.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 262



► Dale Moore, owner-manager of Cattleman's Choice Feedyard of Gage, Okla., says Bill and John do a great job of backgrounding and getting the cattle ready to perform when they get to the CAB-licensed feedyard. Dale is shown above with his wife, Mary.

herdbooks, he traced his cattle — from bulls with names like Carrigroe Mark II and Kilkelly Duke — back to some of the earliest Angus cattle. John credits the records to Bill's memory.

"When we are out on the ranch talking about cattle, I might say a cow is out of one family, and he will correct me," John says. "He may not see the cattle at the Arkansas ranch for months, but he will still recognize a cow and her history."

Bill credits the memory to enjoying his work.

"I will keep doing this as long as it is fun," he says. "I enjoy everything I do, especially working with the cattle."

That appreciation trickles down to every breeding decision. He knows "where each animal has come from and when it was born." Some credit goes to the records he keeps, but most of it goes back to enjoying every aspect of his operation.

Using Irish cow families has presented some challenges to recordkeeping, especially when expected progeny differences (EPDs) came into the picture. With no database on the imported animals, EPD numbers started at zero. Marketing on a grid and receiving carcass data and performance information became essential.

The feeding relationship between Woodstone Angus and Dale Moore, owner-manager of Cattleman's Choice Feedyard, is beginning its fifth year. The Gage, Okla., feedlot became Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed in July 2004.

Moore says Bill and John "do a great job of backgrounding, getting them ready so they know how to perform when they get here." Apparently, they know how to beat 90% Choice each year. The winning entry gained 3 pounds (lb.) a day, converting 5 lb. of feed to a pound of beef for 150 days on feed. Though not implanted, their cost of gain was only 2¢ or 3¢ more than on implanted steers, he adds.

The cattle may look "old style" with lots of hair and bulldog-like stature, Moore says, but when it comes to harvest time, "they grade out of this world."

Harvest data revealed their most attractive side. The steers finished at 95% Choice and higher, with a 58% USDA Prime and *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)-acceptance rate and 30% Yield Grade (YG) 1 and 2. They were the only NACC entry to avoid all discounts on the contest grid, even though there was virtually no sorting. The pen started out at 48 head, and five were not entered because of lighter weights.

Unfortunately, this was the only Woodstone lot Moore had time to enter in the 2004 NACC. In January, however, he had another 100 head of them on wheat — steers and heifers. With five years' experience in feeding the linebred genetics, Moore is setting his goal a little higher for the 2005 competition.

"I am probably getting a little bold," he says. "But we would like to win both sides of the deal this time."

Moore is quick to credit Bill's focus on carcass quality for the recent success; Bill says it is a shared responsibility.

"I think genetics is almost the whole story," he explains. "But the feedyard guy can help a producer get the most out of the genetics. Dale listens to me about what these cattle will do, and follows through on the information. He is a very good listener."

Planning for the future

Plans to expand Woodstone's influence in the Angus world are beginning to look more promising, and Moore is eager to feed more of the progeny. After years of effort, the Woods family members find themselves an "overnight success." Feeding will always be a part of their program, but they see more opportunities to market breeding stock now.

"I want to expand our operation into an alliance of producers who will cooperate by purchasing my cows and bulls," Bill says, noting that Moore's feedyard can fit into the plan. "We'll work with producers to purchase the offspring, and help them as well," he says.

John says luck had nothing to do with this year's winning entry. He has witnessed Bill's management philosophy firsthand, and says it has more to do with other Irish traits: Faith and tenacity that are "just unreal."

"Looking at what he has done over the last 20 years has been amazing," John says. "It is a tribute to the type of cattleman he is."

