



Working Backward

A deep concern for the consumer drives Georgia cattleman forward.

Story & photos by **Laura Conaway**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Start right, work left. It may seem backward, but for forward-thinking cattleman Terry Harris, beginning at the end may be the best route of all.

“What do people want? What are they willing to pay?” he inquired of animal scientists and economists who study the trends. Research suggested 60% of beef consumed in the United States is ground and the average dinner plate is 36 square inches. Allowing one-third of that for protein meant “12 square inches cut to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch on my cattle is a 1-pound (lb.) steak, plus or minus a little bit, but it’s more or less 16 ounces.”

There’s more. The knowledge rolls off his tongue with little effort and great confidence.

“What kind of emotion is going to be released when you put my beef on your dinner plate?” he asks. The question isn’t rhetorical, rather a genuine concern for the influence his 100 Angus cows will have on the

beef eater — and the beef industry, for that matter.

There’s consideration for the consumer, and then there’s Terry Harris.

It’s 5:30 in the morning and Harris, 64, is on the move, attentive to the creaks his south Georgia home makes as he crosses its hardwood floors. His wife of 46 years, whom he affectionately calls Miss Betty, will be up by 7 a.m. There will be a big breakfast and then there will be cattle. From now on, there will always be cattle.

“They were the goal,” he says of the motivation behind his animal science degree from Purdue University and subsequent 37 years with USDA as a meat grader and long-time market news reporter. Two sons and eight moves later, the high-school sweethearts settled in Boston, Ga., and began purchasing keeper cows. Terry formally retired the last day of 2011.

“We’re all a product of our experiences,” he says, channeling the lessons learned along

the journey to become a full-time cowman. “When I graduated in ’75, interest rates were as high as 21%, and I had no money, no ranch to inherit. But my goal was always to have a small cow herd and to tend that cow herd just like a shepherd.”

That desire for detail and love of knowledge moved the dial on his “flock” of 60 commercial and 40 registered females. A few of his steers were part of the pen that won the 2007 National Angus Carcass Challenge, but the next year his first full pen of commercial cull calves averaged 88% low-Choice when the national average was 52%. Today that number is 94%, with 66% achieving *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance and rising. Average daily gain (ADG) moved up by nearly a pound while dry-matter intake decreased by almost half a pound from 6.2, all in less than 10 years.

“When the data came back, that lit such a fire under me,” Harris says, recounting the first time he sent five head to Darrell Busby at



the Iowa Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity, as part of the Georgia Beef Challenge. The revelation still gleams in his eyes.

“We went through that information just like I would as a market news reporter, and it made a huge impact on me,” Harris says. “Right then and there I realized I had been spending a lot of time, a lot of energy producing beef that people really didn’t want on their dinner plate.”

Accepting that fact brought on a decision.

“I had a hobby, and I didn’t want a hobby,” he says. “I wanted a profession, a business, a company.”

Changing gears

So he started to think about what he had observed over the years in packing plants and sale barns. Then he made calls to University of Florida meat scientist Dwayne Johnson and animal scientist Dean Pringle; and to David Gazda, regional manager for the American Angus Association.

“I was raising cattle for my personal preference and was losing money,” Harris says. “I had to start building cattle that the industry wanted and that’s not based on Terry Harris; it’s not based on Darrell Busby or Dwayne Johnson. That’s based on the consumer.”

“Terry’s the first commercial producer I had ever talked to who was paying attention

to tenderness,” Busby says of Harris’ concern for the end user. “He’s done his homework on genetic selection, and his cattle grade well. They’re uniform.”

That’s on purpose. Harris logs into the Association’s database daily. He listens to what those ahead of him have learned and tweaks their lessons to fit his Deep South environment.

“We have looked at more than 97,000 head over the past 14 years from 27 states, and one of the things that’s obvious is ZIP code has nothing to do with the cattle you produce,” Busby says. “Genetics are available to Terry Harris just like they are to someone here in Iowa.”

“Retaining ownership hasn’t led me to greater profits,” Harris says. Instead it’s led to better decisions. “There’s no value in the money because it takes longer to get it, and there’s 10 times more ways to lose it than to make it, but the value is in the information. Somebody’s got to do it, and somebody’s got to share it.”

Looking back, his first step was to “forget about the premiums, just avoid the discounts,” he says of his strategy in 2006 when drought left the market dry and there seemed little possibility for a producer to gain profit margin.

Through his partnership with the Georgia Beef Challenge and the Iowa feedyards, he was able to identify the cattle that gained efficiently, the cattle that received premiums and, more importantly, those that didn’t.

“At that time if we just eliminated the discounts, that was worth an extra \$100 to \$110 a head,” he says, “but it quickly became obvious that you can’t do that unless you have your cows identified.”

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Sires can be tracked, “but unless you can take that information back to the individual cow, and see if she’s producing a discounted calf every year, and if she is, remove her and replace her with a better female, you don’t gain much traction over time.”

An all-or-nothing approach led Harris to develop a balanced-trait selection system. He scanned the Angus breed for bulls with estimated progeny differences (EPDs) in the top 10% across the board.

“That’ll narrow your list pretty quickly,” he says. “We found six out of 250,000 or so.”

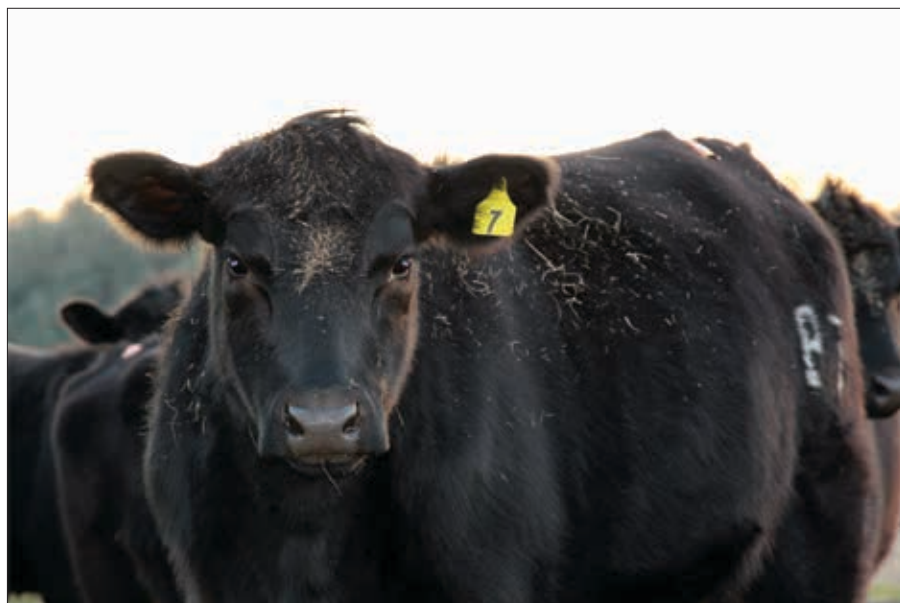
The only problem — most of the proven bulls Harris sought were dead.

“It takes a long time to develop the accuracy that I wanted, but I’ll use an AI (artificial insemination) bull for three to five years. If I have five or six, that’s enough bulls for me to do what I do for the rest of my life.”

Using the tools

Growth, carcass merit — Harris wants it all. He’ll sit down with an EPD report, start at the right and make his way back to the center

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► “Angus are multi-dimensional,” Terry Harris says. “They’re providing a beef-eating experience that people want at a growth rate and cost I can produce for profit.”

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of the page. High-density DNA testing is his latest secret weapon. All Harris Livestock cattle have DNA profiles, and if a producer is unwilling to provide one on an animal he's interested in adding to the herd, he'll pass on it for one who is.

"We have to have a DNA profile because we want our DNA to support the EPDs," he emphasizes.

The Harrises use EPDs first, then ultrasound, then they look to see if DNA confirms it and fills in the gaps on things such as residual average daily gain, dry-matter intake and tenderness. They've even had cattle Warner-Bratzler Shear Force-tested; they average between 6 and 8.

"If we've got those three things through DNA, we let the EPDs take care of the rest," Harris says, before adding that at the very end he'll look at phenotype. "If you don't have

structure, you can have the best animal in the world and 80% of the people will walk right by."

Beyond the consumer, Harris wants his customers to have access to "purebred quality at a commercial price."

"I'm trying to develop an animal that has specific traits, will hit certain goals and earn premiums," he says. "I'm at the mercy of three or four large packers out there unless I can provide them with a product they have trouble finding."

So Harris designed it so packers demand what he's able to produce with the Angus breed through science and innovation.

"It's not about black hair," he says, "because when you walk into that packing plant, you better not see any hair at all."

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His customers reach across the South, not always aware of the value they hold in information gathered from their seller. Harris rests well though, knowing he's put cattle into a system that, if all goes according to plan, should satisfy the consumer.

"I'm a small producer. I can't supply enough feeder cattle to make a big impact, but what I can do is put together a small group of producers, and we can impact the industry in a very big way."

By combining resources with nearby cattlemen, Harris leads the charge of finding genetics, analyzing EPDs and looking down the road.

"I sold 15 bulls this year, and that's no big deal. But Hubert down in Waukeelah, Fla., he sold 15, and Sammy in Monticello, Fla., he sold 15. Now, all of a sudden, we can service several thousand cows. That starts to make a pretty good impact."

Call their cell phones any time after 8 a.m., when Terry and Miss Betty head out the door, and the conversation will likely turn to cattle. They'll make the rounds for an hour or two before they head home to clear some land, paint, whatever keeps them active. If there's an issue, they'll be with the cows till dark.

"I try to share my successes, and more importantly, my failures," Harris says of the next generation of cowman hopefuls. He'd love his own grandchildren to share his passion one day, but until then, and while they grow, he'll strive toward his own goal.

"I want to sell a load of Prime beef, YG (Yield Grade) 2 or better. I'd say we're in striking distance."



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Editor's Note: *Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*

